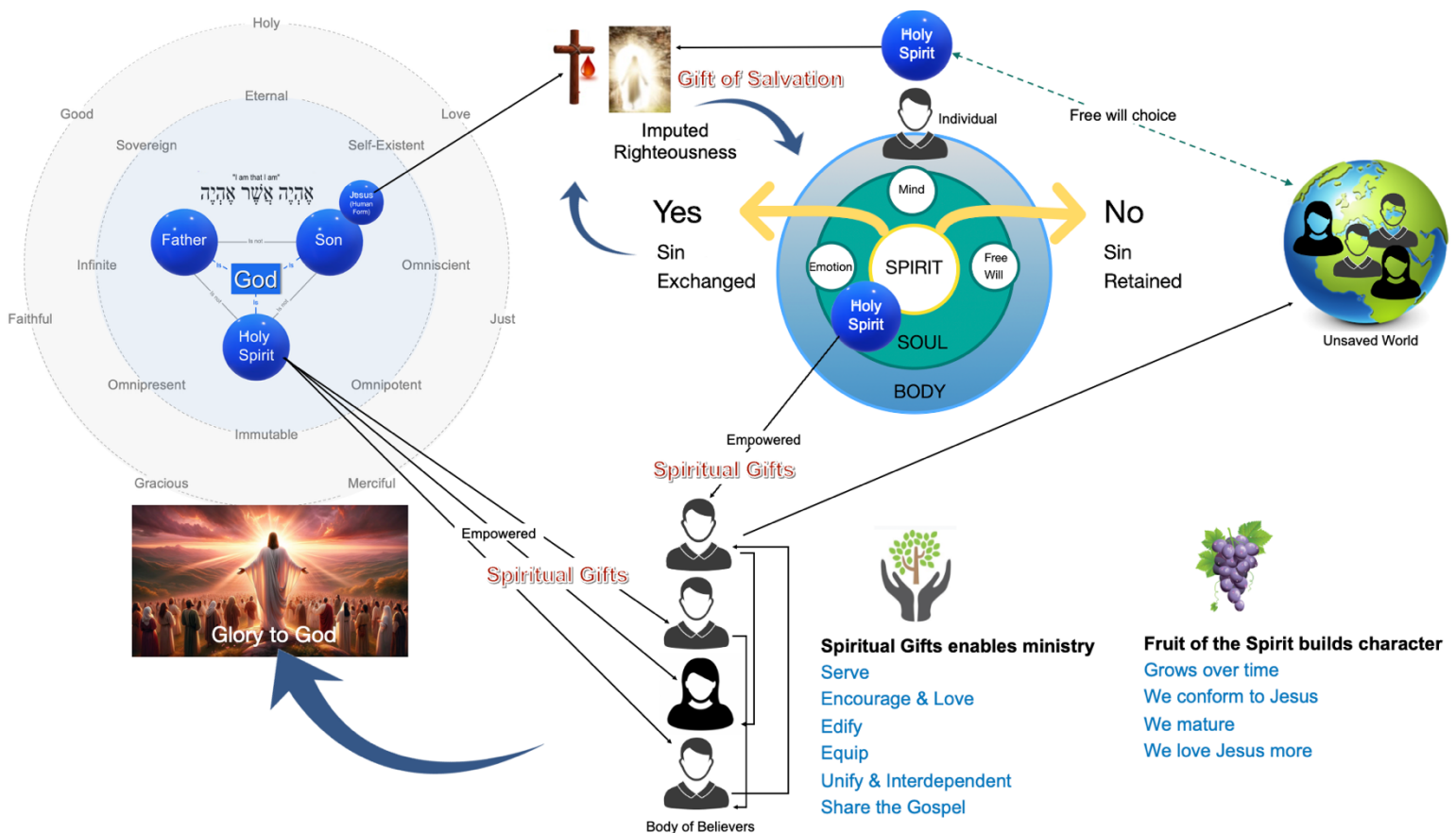
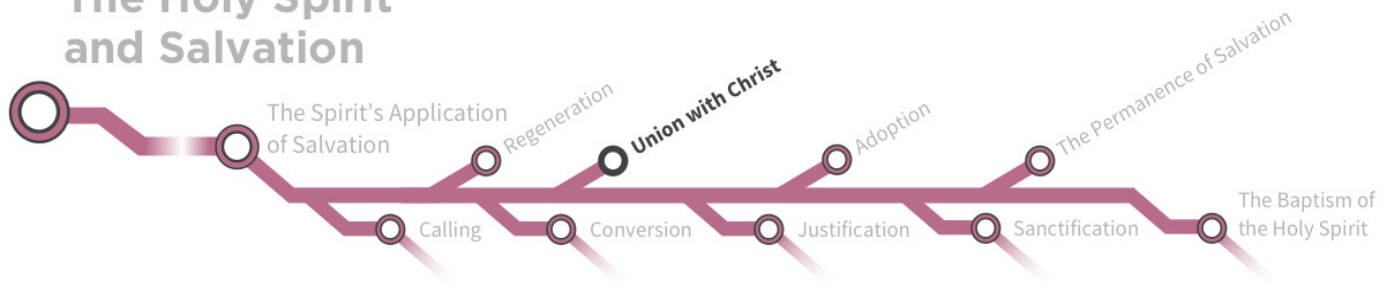


The  
doctrine  
of

# Union with Christ



# The Holy Spirit and Salvation



## INTRODUCTION

A persistent challenge in Christian theology is understanding how Jesus' life, death, and resurrection benefit believers distant from him in time, place, and culture, and how His spiritual accomplishments, historical events, and unique status transform their lives and standing before God. The church addresses these questions through the doctrine of union with Christ.

**United by faith:** Martin Luther's emphasis on faith as the sole means of union with Christ profoundly shaped Protestant theology, asserting that humans, utterly incapable of good works or free will for salvation, receive it entirely from Christ's sufficiency. Faith arises from recognizing this helplessness and unites the sinful soul with Christ—like a bride with her bridegroom—resulting in a double imputation where Christ's righteousness becomes the believer's and the believer's penalty for sin falls on Jesus. This formed the core of the Lutheran and Protestant doctrine of justification, though critics argue it risks making union with Christ depend on the unreliable human faculty of faith, contrary to Luther's intent<sup>1</sup>.

**Covenantal union:** The Reformed tradition explains union with Christ through the lens of covenant—a divine framework of mutual obligations rooted in God's unbreakable commitment to forgive, transform, and protect His people, enabling their faith, love, and obedience. This covenantal union grounds believers' relationship with God in Christ's mediatory work and divine promises. A key development, federal union, draws on Paul's teaching to parallel God's dealings with humanity "in Adam" (imputing sin to descendants) and "in Christ" (imputing obedience and atonement to followers), with Christ as the representative "federal head." Ultimately, the covenant rests on God's eternal gracious election rather than human faith (itself a gift of grace), prioritizing predestination—though critics worry this implies arbitrariness in God's dealings with humanity<sup>1</sup>.

**Why study this doctrine:** The doctrine of union with Christ, though central to New Testament salvation theology, is infrequently taught in modern churches and Bible studies due to its perceived abstract and mystical nature, its comprehensive scope that integrates all aspects of salvation (making it hard to isolate), historical shifts prioritizing more concrete doctrines like justification, and contemporary evangelical emphases on practical, decision-oriented teaching over deeply relational truths.

Historically, the doctrine was more prominent in patristic writers (e.g., Athanasius, Augustine), and especially Reformed theology (Calvin, Puritans, Jonathan Edwards), which considered it a vital, central, and animating core of the faith. There has been a resurgence in scholarly works to retrieve this doctrine, but it hasn't fully trickled down to small group bible studies.

Rediscovering union with Christ can transform believers by reminding them that **spiritual blessings are not necessarily abstract**, but can be realities received because we are truly, vitally one with the risen Lord. It is comprehensible, tangible, transformative, practical, and awe inspiring if we take the time to unpack the many facets of this doctrine.

<sup>1</sup> A. J. Spence, "Union with Christ," in *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic*, ed. Martin Davie et al. (London; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; InterVarsity Press, 2016), 930.

## Objectives of this study:

1. Gain deeper insights into this foundational reality – a central doctrine affecting other doctrine.
2. Discover how the union between Christ and believers works and what effect that has.
3. Cultivate recognition of allusions and echoes of OT passages in the NT.
4. Enhance discernment regarding foreshadowing, fulfillment and the “why”.
5. Sharpen exegesis and hermeneutics skills to better understand what scripture is communicating.
6. Learn how to “breathe in” the 360-degree view of the text being studied.
7. Develop deeper appreciation of Jesus’ messaging regarding locus shift.
8. Understand in greater detail how we mature spiritually.
9. Improve our “Imager” quality to bring God glory.
10. Know our identity in fuller measure.
11. Apply these learnings – actions; internal and external.

## Study foundational text:

**John 15:1-11 ESV** <sup>1</sup> "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. <sup>2</sup> Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup> Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. <sup>5</sup> I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup> If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. <sup>9</sup> As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. <sup>10</sup> If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. <sup>11</sup> These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

**Cultural Context:** Vineyards were ubiquitous throughout the Mediterranean world during the biblical period. J. Carl Laney writes that Galilee earned renown as the premier grape-growing region in the first century<sup>1</sup>, however that could only be true in reference that local region.

While Galilee produced good local wines for everyday use and cultural/religious purposes (famously referenced in stories like the wedding at Cana), they were not regarded as "the best" in the Roman world of the first century AD. That honor remained firmly with Italian regions like the Falernian district. Provincial wines, including those from the eastern Mediterranean, only rose in broader competition later in the Empire. Nevertheless, this local agricultural context shaped how Jesus’s audience would have understood His vine metaphor—it wasn’t abstract theology but grounded in lived experience.



**Absurdity check:** Today it is common to hear Christian’s say that when Jesus turned the water into wine at the Cana wedding it must have been exceedingly exceptional. Perhaps comparable to 15-year-old Silver Oak Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon because in John 2:10 the bridegroom says the quality of the later wine was better than the first.



Modern thinking is that if Jesus made it, one must assume it was the best we can imagine. While this is possible, it should be noted that today's wines would be unfamiliar to first century Galilean palates.

This is just one of many examples of thinking in current culture terms when contemplating scripture. Roman writers like Pliny the Elder (77 AD) and Strabo explicitly praised wines such as Falernian (from Campania) as the highest-ranked, followed by Setinum, Caecuban, Alban, and others from central-southern Italy. Falernian was a white wine that turned amber to dark brown with age due to deliberate oxidation during long storage in clay amphorae. The alcohol content was exceptionally high for the era, estimated at 15–16% ABV thus it would have been “hot” on the palate. It was bold, rich, fiery, strong, and fruity. Aging developed oxidized flavors (nutty, prune-like, caramelized), with a thick, viscous texture<sup>2,3</sup>. This would be the quality point of reference outside of Cana, not that which modern oenology produces from Napa, CA. Today's wine enthusiasts would reject Roman Falernian wine as unrefined, low quality and undrinkable.

When we inject our modern context into scripture things get weird real fast. For example, the six stone jars each held 20-30 gallons thus Jesus converted 120 gallons of water to wine. One gallon = five (750 ml) bottles of wine. This is the equivalent to 600 bottles of wine that Jesus converted. Today a bottle of Silver Oak costs \$185 therefore the total cost of wine for the Cana wedding would be \$111,000 (present value). Using a conservative \$150 per 1 denarius (aligning with bread/meat price comparisons and soldier pay equivalents):  $\$111,000 \div \$150 \approx 740$  denarii which equaled 2–4 years' income for an average family in Cana—enough to buy a small farm plot, several slaves, or livestock, or live comfortably without work for years. Cana was a modest Jewish village with a population estimated at 200–400 people which scholars debate if it was marked by widespread poverty or moderate prosperity. Archeological evidence points to a middle ground, with most villagers neither destitute nor affluent. Such an extravagant wine expenditure seems out of character for Jesus and the messages He was delivering. The water Jesus turned into wine was obviously better than previously served but we don't need to superimpose our cultural context onto the scriptures to establish that fact nor does Jesus need spin doctors to make His miracles any more amazing than recorded.



**Galilean vessels industry:** The northern regions of Galilee's terrain is rocky and mountainous thus unsuitable for extensive crop cultivation, prompting communities to develop manufacturing alongside herding and limited agriculture in that area<sup>6</sup>. This geographical constraint became an economic advantage for pottery production. According to archaeologist Mordechai Avian, residents “adapted themselves to the geographical conditions of rocky terrain and lack of arable land” by developing pottery production alongside textile industries<sup>6</sup>. The region's

natural clay deposits made pottery manufacturing a practical response to environmental limitations. Villages like Shikhin supported a major pottery-producing industry<sup>7</sup>.

Galilee's pottery centers benefited from strategic positioning and demand. Archaeological surveys found that approximately 15% of storage jars discovered in nearby Sepphoris originated from Shikhin, accounting for the majority of that pottery type throughout Galilee<sup>7</sup>. A sudden increase in locally produced pottery from workshops at Kefar Hananya and Shikhin coincided with decreased imported pottery, possibly reflecting Jewish preferences for vessels produced by fellow Jews due to ritual purity concerns<sup>8</sup>. The success of Galilean pottery also depended on commercial networks. The presence of manufacturing towns near Sepphoris and Tiberias indicates an active trade economy where manufacturers sold and traded their goods<sup>6</sup>. Rather than



isolation, these pottery centers thrived through connection to urban markets and regional commerce, transforming geographical disadvantage into economic opportunity.

Besides clay pottery soft chalk or limestone stone vessels became popular due to observance of purity laws among broad sectors of the Jewish population in the late Second Temple period<sup>9</sup>. This represented a deliberate religious choice based on material properties. Unlike clay vessels, stone vessels would not catch impurities if they came into contact with an unclean object or person<sup>10</sup>. This made stone fundamentally different from ceramic materials—the stone’s non-porous nature prevented ritual contamination. Stone vessels, unlike ceramic vessels, cannot easily be made unclean<sup>11</sup>, which explains their appeal for those observing Jewish purity regulations. The archaeological evidence reveals how widespread this practice became. Stone vessels appear at settlements throughout Judea and Galilee, combined with their absence from sites inhabited by the Yahwistic population of Samaria, reinforcing their connection with observance of purity laws relating to the Jerusalem temple practices<sup>9</sup>. Stone vessels are found in different socio-economic contexts, including the mansions in Jerusalem’s Jewish Quarter, the settlement at Qumran, and villages and towns around Judea and Galilee<sup>9</sup>.

**Galilean fishing industry:** Fishing constituted the primary industry of the Sea of Galilee, driven by the abundance of fish that provided a major protein source for the region<sup>12</sup>. By the first century, at least 16 harbors had been constructed along the lake’s shores, with each coastal settlement maintaining its own harbor, though they varied considerably in size<sup>12</sup>.

The lake supported several important fish species, including tilapia Galilea (known as St. Peter’s fish), carp, and sardines<sup>13</sup>. Fishermen employed nets cast either from shore or boat, with the dragnet or seine net being the most common method—these nets were dragged to shore where the catch was sorted<sup>13</sup>. Maintaining nets required regular washing, drying, and mending after use<sup>13</sup>. Hooks from the Roman period have also been recovered in archaeological excavations around the lake<sup>12</sup>.

The fishing economy operated within a hierarchical structure. While the Gospels depict small family enterprises, fishing was largely controlled by local rulers through tax collectors who contracted with individual fishermen<sup>13</sup>. Fishermen likely formed collectives and hired additional labor as needed<sup>13</sup>. Archaeological discoveries at Bethsaida—including fishing hooks, lead weights, anchors, sail and net needles—demonstrate the economic centrality of fishing to lakeside communities<sup>14</sup>. A first-century boat discovered in 1986 provides tangible evidence of the vessels employed for both fishing and transportation during Jesus’s era<sup>14</sup>.

#### **The top revenue producing Industries:**

1. **Olive** production dominated Galilee’s economy<sup>15</sup>, with the region supplying oil to Syrians, Phoenicians, and distant populations<sup>15</sup>. According to rabbinic tradition, “It is easier to raise a legion of olive trees in Galilee than to raise one child in Judæa,”<sup>15</sup> underscoring the region’s exceptional suitability for this crop.
2. **Wheat** production ranked second in importance, with Phoenician demand for Galilean grain being enormous<sup>15</sup>.
3. **Dried figs, grapes, wine, pomegranates, honey, and livestock**<sup>15</sup>.
4. **Fishing** was another major revenue source, with choice fish varieties being processed and distributed throughout the near east, and towns like Tarichea and Bethsaida deriving their names from fish factories<sup>15</sup>. Much of the catch was salted for export, with Magdala (Taricheae) serving as the center of this salted-fish industry<sup>16</sup>.
5. **Flax** production also generated significant income, as coastal weaving establishments and dye-houses transformed it into valuable fabrics<sup>16</sup>. In rocky northern regions where agriculture proved limited, manufacturing focused on woolens, pottery, and stone vessels<sup>17</sup>.

**What about carpentry?** Noticeably missing in the top industries of the Galilee region is carpentry. In first-century Galilee this was not a significant industry in the regional economic sense. Agriculture from small family farms dominated the local economy<sup>27</sup>, while fishing and

pottery production also contributed to the Galilean economy<sup>27</sup>. Carpentry did hold important local significance as a skilled trade. Joseph and Jesus were both “*tektōn*” by trade—a term rendered “carpenter” in English but actually referring to a skilled worker (more akin to a general contractor) in local building materials including wood, stone, or metal. In first-century Galilee a “*tektōn*” was primarily a stonemason<sup>28</sup>. A “*tektōn*” was hired to build the specialized parts of structures beyond the skill of townspeople and to oversee construction, making them part builder, part architect, part contractor, and part artisan<sup>28</sup>.

Anthropological studies suggest that every town, village, or group of villages had a “*tektōn*” to service its specialized building needs, meaning Joseph and then Jesus likely served as the “*tektōn*” for Nazareth<sup>28</sup>. With Sepphoris located only four miles away—less than two hours’ journey—skilled workers from small villages like Nazareth would have found employment in neighboring towns and cities, exposing them to a larger cultural world<sup>28</sup>.

Wood availability in first-century Galilee was limited but sufficient for local carpentry needs. Carpenters worked primarily with local timbers including cypress, pine, sycomore-fig, Christ-thorn wood, and olive for smaller items<sup>27</sup>, with palm trunks used for roof beams<sup>27</sup>. Jesus would have been familiar with these materials and likely also knew of exotic and expensive cedar (from Lebanon) for special uses<sup>27</sup>.

The timber supply operated through practical mechanisms suited to village economies. In a first-century village, carpenters worked with basic materials that reflected what ordinary people could afford<sup>27</sup>. Rather than relying on abundant fresh timber, carpenters likely obtained wood through multiple sources: customers may have brought pieces to be fashioned, or wood was re-used by recovering sound parts from old door posts, roof beams, or broken ploughs to recycle into something smaller<sup>27</sup>.

This scarcity-management approach suggests that Galilean carpenters operated within constraints. The region’s forests were not extensive enough to support large-scale timber harvesting, unlike the Phoenician coast where boats were constructed of local cypress with masts of cedar and oars of oak<sup>28</sup>. For major construction projects requiring significant timber quantities, wood and experienced carpenters were supplied by agreement with Tyre for the construction of David’s palace and the Temple built by Solomon<sup>28</sup>. For village “*tektōns*” like Joseph and Jesus, working with locally available wood and recycled materials was simply the practical reality of their trade.

While carpentry was not a major regional industry comparable to agriculture or fishing, it represented a valued specialized craft that provided employment and social standing within village economies. Jewish and Roman historical records indicate that Herod Antipas was an active builder who commissioned multiple cities in the Galilee region such as rebuilding Sepphoris into his “jewel of the Galilee,” located just a short distance from Nazareth which archaeological excavations have confirmed. Later Antipas constructed Tiberias on the southeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee as a more comfortable retreat during the hot summer months. However, Tiberias was built on old burial grounds, making it unsuitable for Torah-observant Jews, so Antipas forcibly relocated Jews there to populate his new city. Tiberias eventually became the capital of Galilee until Caligula deposed Antipas in 39 AD. Through these building projects Galilean “*tektōns*” could make a decent living if they were willing to travel to the job site.

**Why Galilee?** Galilee’s location on international trade routes connecting Mesopotamia with Egypt created additional revenue through customs levied on passing caravans and travelers<sup>18</sup>. This diversified economy—combining agriculture, fishing, manufacturing, and trade—made Galilee one of the most prosperous regions in first-century Palestine. Chorazin and Bethsaida served as associate villages to Capernaum, with Jesus cursing all three towns (comparing them to the notoriously wicked cities of Tyre and Sidon) because their inhabitants refused to believe despite witnessing His miracles. Peter and Andrew, who later lived in Capernaum, were born in Bethsaida, which functioned as a thriving fishing center. Jesus ministered frequently in Bethsaida, and some Gospel events likely occurred between the two towns of Capernaum and Bethsaida. The broader region surrounding Capernaum included numerous other villages and

fishing communities along the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Galilee as a whole contained 204 towns and villages according to Josephus, the Jewish historian and Roman governor of the area.

Archaeological evidence of a Roman customs house and the presence of tax collectors<sup>19</sup> further demonstrates Capernaum's role as a significant trading hub. The town was home to a wide variety of professions including fishermen, farmers, artisans, merchants, government officials, soldiers, scholars, and religious leaders<sup>19</sup>.

**Nazareth (only 24 miles from Capernaum)**, by contrast, operated on a much smaller and more localized scale. Current estimates place Nazareth's population at only 200–500 during Jesus's time, with agriculture—including wine and olive oil production—as the primary industry<sup>21</sup>. The village was likely self-sufficient, though poor<sup>21</sup>. Nazareth receives no mention in non-Christian sources from the Roman period and likely was known only at the local level, perhaps enjoying little esteem even there<sup>21</sup>.

While Nazareth lay only 3.2 miles south of Sepphoris and would not have been far from major trade routes<sup>21</sup>, its geography and economy remained fundamentally agricultural and subsistence-based. Capernaum's strategic location, harbor infrastructure, and integration into regional and international trade networks made it a far more commercially significant settlement.

**Capernaum functioned as the primary center for Jesus's ministry in Galilee**<sup>22</sup>, serving as his operational base after his hometown of Nazareth rejected him<sup>23</sup>. In Capernaum he called Matthew as a disciple and healed the paralyzed servant of a centurion as well as Peter's mother-in-law<sup>23</sup>.

Beyond Capernaum, Jesus conducted ministry across multiple Galilean settlements. He began his public ministry at Cana, where he turned water into wine at a wedding<sup>23</sup>. In Nazareth's synagogue, he announced himself as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy<sup>23</sup>. At Nain, he raised the widow's only son to life<sup>22</sup>. Chorazin and Bethsaida were cities he chastised for their unbelief<sup>23</sup>.

Notably, Jesus deliberately avoided preaching in the cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias, perhaps to stay out of the public eye and avoid trouble with authorities before the appointed time<sup>24</sup>. He operated exclusively in rural villages rather than entering King Herod Antipas's cities<sup>25</sup>. The Synoptic Gospels locate the majority of his public ministry in the villages and towns of Galilee<sup>26</sup>, reflecting a deliberate strategy focused on rural populations rather than urban centers.

Capernaum was an important commercial center due to its location on the Sea of Galilee and major roads, with fishing, agriculture, and trade all contributing to its economy<sup>19</sup>. The commercial advantages of its position on a major trade route surrounded by fertile lands and plentiful fishing resulted in considerable economic prosperity<sup>20</sup> and with that a much large population base and significant information dissemination network potential. Jesus' focus was reaching as many people as he could therefore operating within the Capernaum region was logical.

<sup>1</sup> Titus Kennedy, *The Essential Archaeological Guide to Bible Lands* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2023), 292.

<sup>2</sup> James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Luke*, ed. D. A. Carson, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Apollos, 2015), 143.

<sup>3</sup> Ian W.K. Koiter, *Nazareth*, Lexham Bible Dictionary, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Sam Gould, Robert H. King, and Rodney Noel Saunders, *Being Christian in the Twenty-First Century* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> David A. Fiensy, *The Archaeology of Daily Life: Ordinary Persons in Late Second Temple Israel* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2021).



- <sup>8</sup> Alan Todd, *Galilee, History of*, Lexham Bible Dictionary, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).
- <sup>9</sup> Jodi Magness, Stone and Dung, Oil and Spit, *Jewish Daily Life in the Time of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 70–71.
- <sup>10</sup> Emily J. Thomassen, *Jesus' Ministry at Cana in Galilee*, Lexham Geographic Commentary on the Gospels, ed. Barry J. Beitzel and Kristopher A. Lyle, Lexham Geographic Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 76.
- <sup>11</sup> Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 116.
- <sup>12</sup> Titus Kennedy, *Excavating the Evidence for Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2022), 100.
- <sup>13</sup> Dana M. Harris, *The Sea of Galilee and Fishing in the First Century*, Baker Illustrated Bible Background Commentary, ed. J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2020), 786–787.
- <sup>14</sup> Larry R. Helyer, *The Life and Witness of Peter* (Downers Grove, IL; Nottingham, England: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press; Apollos, 2012), 24.
- <sup>15</sup> Selah Merrill, *GALILEE*, A Dictionary of the Bible: Dealing with Its Language, Literature, and Contents Including the Biblical Theology, ed. James Hastings et al. (New York; Edinburgh: Charles Scribner's Sons; T. & T. Clark, 1911–1912), 2:101.
- <sup>16</sup> Thomas V. Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas*, Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 219.
- <sup>17</sup> Sam Gould, Robert H. King, and Rodney Noel Saunders, *Being Christian in the Twenty-First Century* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2017).
- <sup>18</sup> J. Carl Laney, *Galilee*, Lexham Bible Dictionary, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).
- <sup>19</sup> Titus Kennedy, *The Essential Archaeological Guide to Bible Lands* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2023), 292.
- <sup>20</sup> James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Luke*, ed. D. A. Carson, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Apollos, 2015), 143.
- <sup>21</sup> Ian W.K. Koiter, *Nazareth*, Lexham Bible Dictionary, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).
- <sup>22</sup> Henry W. Holloman, *Galilee, Galileans*, in Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1:835.
- <sup>23</sup> Jack W. Hayford, *Spirit Filled Life Bible For Students*, (Nashville; Atlanta; London; Vancouver: Thomas Nelson, 1995).
- <sup>24</sup> I Howard Marshall, *The Gospels and Acts: Matthew to Acts*, Zondervan Handbook to the Bible, ed. Pat Alexander and David Alexander (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 587.
- <sup>25</sup> Chris Seeman, *Josephus, Flavius*, Lexham Bible Dictionary, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).
- <sup>26</sup> Thomas V. Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas*, Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 219.
- <sup>27</sup> Thomas V. Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas*, Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 219.
- <sup>28</sup> Paul H. Wright, *The Size and Makeup of Nazareth at the Time of Jesus*, Lexham Geographic Commentary on the Gospels, ed. Barry J. Beitzel and Kristopher A. Lyle, Lexham Geographic Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 38–39.

**Vine Symbolism Context:** In Galilee growers cultivated vines on terraced hillsides where soil retained winter moisture, reserving flatter valleys for grain crops<sup>1</sup>. Vineyards required four to five years to mature, and consistent pruning was essential to encourage fruit production rather than excessive foliage<sup>4</sup>. Tending vines was communal work, with entire families gathering crops together during harvest<sup>2</sup>. This labor-intensive process made viticulture central to household economics and daily life.

The vine held profound symbolic weight in Israelite consciousness. **Israel itself was consistently represented as a vineyard** in Old Testament prophecy—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, and the psalmist all employed this imagery<sup>1</sup>. The vine’s cultural significance was so pronounced that Jews minted coins bearing vine imagery during the Jewish War (AD 66–70), and Josephus reports a massive gold vine sculpture adorned the Second Temple entrance<sup>1</sup>.

Yet the vineyard symbolism carried a darker dimension. In every Old Testament illustration, **the vine disappoints its keeper, with fruitless vines** described as “trampled,” “destroyed,” “thrown on fire,” “withered,” and “burned”—depicting judgment on unfaithful Israel<sup>1</sup>. When Jesus claimed to be “the true vine,” His audience would have grasped both the promise of fruitfulness and the warning of judgment embedded in that metaphor. By adopting vine imagery to describe discipleship, Jesus reframed the relationship: His disciples bear abundant fruit as branches sustained by Him, provided they keep His commandments<sup>3</sup>.

**Jesus’ Ministry Context:** Up to John chapter 15, Jesus’ ministry in the Gospel of John has progressed through several distinct phases, marked by increasing revelation of His identity and growing opposition from religious authorities. Here’s a summary of the context:

#### 1. Early Ministry and Revelation (John 1–4):

- John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the Lamb of God.
- Jesus calls His first disciples.
- His first miracle at the wedding in Cana reveals His glory.
- He cleanses the temple, foreshadowing His authority.
- He engages in significant theological conversations with Nicodemus (on new birth) and the Samaritan woman (on living water and true worship), revealing His divine nature and universal mission.

#### 2. Growing Public Ministry and Controversy (John 5–10):

- Jesus performs miracles, such as healing the paralytic at Bethesda on the Sabbath, which sparks intense conflict with Jewish leaders over His authority and interpretation of the Law.
- He feeds the five thousand, leading to the “Bread of Life” discourse, where he presents himself as the true sustenance for eternal life, causing many disciples to turn away.
- During the Feast of Tabernacles, he declares himself the “Light of the World” and engages in debates about His origin and identity, leading to attempts to arrest him.
- He heals a man born blind, further escalating tensions as the Pharisees interrogate the man and excommunicate him.
- He teaches about himself as the “Good Shepherd,” contrasting himself with false leaders and emphasizing His sacrificial love for His sheep. This discourse also leads to accusations of demon possession and blasphemy.

#### 3. Climax of Public Ministry and Preparation for Passion (John 11–12):

- The dramatic raising of Lazarus from the dead is a pivotal event, demonstrating Jesus’ power over death and solidifying the decision of the Sanhedrin to put him to death.
- Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem is met with public acclaim, further alarming the authorities.
- He speaks about His impending death as a glorification and the drawing of all people to himself.



#### 4. The Upper Room Discourse Begins (John 13–14):

- This marks a shift from public ministry to intimate instruction for His disciples.
- Jesus washes His disciples' feet, setting an example of humble service.
- He predicts His betrayal by Judas and Peter's denial.
- He gives the "new commandment" to love one another.
- He comforts his disciples, promising them a place in His Father's house and the coming of the Holy Spirit (the Helper/Advocate) who will teach and remind them of all He has said.
- He emphasizes that He is "the way, the truth, and the life."

By the time we reach John chapter 15, Jesus is in the Upper Room, having shared His last supper with His disciples. He has just finished comforting them and preparing them for His imminent departure, betrayal, and crucifixion. The discourse on the "true vine" (John 15) immediately follows these intimate teachings, further elaborating on the nature of their relationship with Him and the Father, and how they are to live and bear fruit in His absence.

<sup>1</sup> J. Carl Laney, *The Vine, the Branches, and What It Means to Abide*, Lexham Geographic Commentary on the Gospels, ed. Barry J. Beitzel and Kristopher A. Lyle, Lexham Geographic Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 432–433.

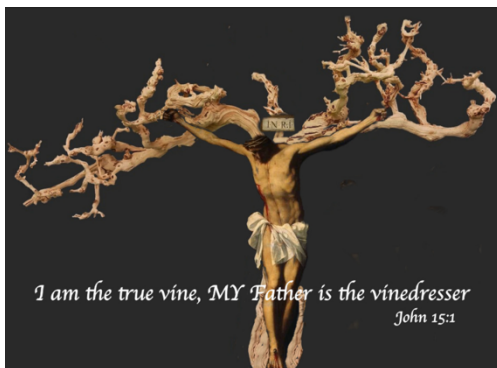
<sup>2</sup> William Ramsay, "VINUM," in *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, ed. William Smith (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1865), 1207.

<sup>3</sup> Ralph Barnes Grindrod, *Review of Bacchus. An Essay on the Nature, Causes, Effects, and Cure of Intemperance and Anti-Bacchus. An Essay on the Evils Connected with the Use of Intoxicating Drinks*, *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* (1841), 298–299.

<sup>4</sup> Roland L. McMillan, *Vines and Viticulture*, *Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> R. Dennis Cole, *Vine, Vineyard*, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 1356.

### Jesus the "True Vine" – the Union is introduced



**Israel's covenant violations:** At the heart of the farewell discourse John records the allegory depicting Jesus as the true vine in John 15:1–17<sup>1,2</sup>. As mentioned above, the Old Testament frequently uses the vineyard or vine as a symbol for Israel, God's covenant people<sup>3</sup>. However, whereas the vine's purpose of existence is to bear fruit for its owner, references to Israel as God's vine regularly stress Israel's failure to produce good fruit, resulting in divine judgment<sup>4</sup>.

Israel repeatedly abandoned the Lord to serve other gods (little "e" elohim), the Ba'alim ("") in particular, turning away from Yahweh, who had delivered them from Egypt (Judges 2:11–13). Isaiah depicts Israel as children who rebelled against their father, lacking even the basic knowledge and obedience that animals show their masters, having forsaken the Holy One of Israel (Isaiah 1:2–4). The prophet Hosea presents God's formal accusation against Israel, charging the land with lacking faithfulness, steadfast love, and knowledge of God, while listing sins including swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and adultery (Hosea 4:1–2).

The prophets employ striking metaphors to convey Israel's betrayal. The prophet Jeremiah describes Israel as unfaithful, engaging in idolatry on high hills and under green trees, refusing to return to God despite his expectation that Israel would repent (Jeremiah 3:6–10). The prophet Ezekiel uses the image of a woman who trusted in her beauty and played the whore, taking God's gifts of gold and silver to fashion idols and commit sexual unfaithfulness (Ezekiel 16:15–



22). The relationship is compared to a treacherous wife abandoning her husband (Jeremiah 3:20).

**The core issue involves covenant violation and idolatry.** Israel returned to the iniquities of their forefathers, pursuing other elohim and breaking the covenant God (Elohim) had made with their ancestors (Jeremiah 11:10). Jeremiah captures this as a dual evil: forsaking God, the fountain of living waters, while constructing broken cisterns that cannot hold water (Jeremiah 2:13). Despite repeated warnings through prophets and seers calling Israel to repentance and obedience, the people remained stubborn, refusing to believe in the Lord their God (2 Kings 17:7–18).

This pattern persisted cyclically—Israel disobeyed, suffered consequences, experienced divine deliverance, then returned to evil, acting presumptuously and stiffening their neck against God’s commandments (Nehemiah 9:26–30).

**Judaism Laws - present but not yet “codified”:** As Judaism developed, the tradition established 613 laws total—248 positive commandments (actions to perform) and 365 negative commandments (actions to avoid)<sup>39</sup>. This means Judaism added 603 additional laws beyond the Ten Commandments.

These 613 laws were organized into twelve families of commandments<sup>40</sup>, reflecting a comprehensive legal framework rather than the foundational ten. The division into 365 negative and 248 positive commands carried symbolic meaning: one command for each day of the year to guard against temptation, and one for each member of the human body to encourage obedience with one’s whole being<sup>40</sup>.

Jewish tradition viewed the Law as an indivisible unit, with all laws considered equally binding<sup>40</sup>—rather than ranking the Ten Commandments as uniquely authoritative. In Jewish cataloging, the Ten Commandments weren’t placed first or given special emphasis; they were actually expanded into thirteen laws by subdividing the prohibitions against idolatry and the Sabbath commandment, then numbered serially as items twenty-six through thirty-eight within the complete list of 613<sup>40</sup>.

The earliest documented reference to the precise count of 613 commandments comes from Rabbi Simlai, a fourth-century sage in the Land of Israel<sup>41–44</sup>, well after the Babylonian captivity (586 BCE). This means the formal systematization of the complete legal framework occurred centuries later.

During the Talmudic period itself (period spanned from 73 AD to 425 AD<sup>41–44</sup>, a transformative era when Judaism fundamentally restructured itself after the destruction of the Second Temple, there was no effort to precisely enumerate each commandment, with the first systematic attempt made during the Gaonic period in the second half of the eighth century<sup>41–44</sup>. So, the rabbinical codification happened gradually over many centuries following the Babylonian exile.

The 613 laws represent an enumeration of commandments already present in Jewish tradition—not a sudden addition. The Torah itself contained these laws, but Jewish scholars only later counted and organized them systematically. The 613 total can be understood as comprising 611 scriptural commandments announced by Moses plus the first two of the Ten Commandments spoken directly by God<sup>41–44</sup>.

The development of the oral law and rabbinic interpretation—which expanded how these commandments were understood and applied—occurred after the Babylonian captivity and throughout the Second Temple period. But the formal recognition of 613 distinct laws emerged much later, during the medieval period, through the work of scholars like Maimonides.

**Locus Shift:** In contrast to Israel’s failure, Jesus claims to be the “true vine,” in John 15:1–11, bringing forth the fruit Israel failed to produce. Thus Jesus, the Messiah and Son of God, fulfills Israel’s destiny. As the true vine of God<sup>4</sup> this draws parallels with Ezekiel Chapter 17<sup>5</sup>.

As the exemplary vine, Jesus embodies God’s true intentions for Israel: Jesus is the channel through whom God’s blessings flow. Just as Jesus is the new temple and the fulfillment of Jewish festival symbolism<sup>4</sup>, so also, He is the true vine. The implication being **that faith in Jesus**

becomes the decisive characteristic for membership among God's people<sup>5</sup>. Whereas Old Testament Israel was ethnically constrained, the new messianic community, made up of believing Jews and Gentiles, is united by faith in Jesus the Messiah. Jews still have a place in God's family, but they must come to God on His terms rather than their own<sup>6</sup>. A paradigm shift has taken place: faith in Jesus has replaced keeping the law as the primary point of reference<sup>6</sup>.

"I am the true vine" is the last of John's seven "I am" sayings. "True" (alēthinē) contrasts Jesus with Old Testament Israel in its lack of fruitfulness and spiritual degeneracy<sup>7,8,9,10</sup>. The Greek term *ἄμπελος* (*ampelos*) which means grapevine or vine occurs elsewhere in the New Testament only in Matt. 26:29; James 3:12; Rev. 14:18–19. References to vines and vineyards occur frequently in Synoptic parables (Matt. 20:1–16; 21:28–32, 33–44; Luke 13:6–9). With Moses describing the promised land as containing "wheat and barley, vines" in Deuteronomy 8:7–9, first century Judean's would have clearly understood the allegory.

**Spiritual growth:** Jesus' statement in 15:1 that His "Father is the vinedresser" harks back to Isaiah's first vineyard song, where God is depicted as spading, clearing, planting, and taking care of the vineyard, only to be rewarded with sour grapes (Isa. 5:1–7; Ps. 80:8–9). According to John 15:2, the vinedresser does two things to ensure maximum fruit production ("he removes . . . he prunes"; Heb. 6:7–8):

- (1) In the winter he cuts off the dry and withered branches, which may involve pruning the vines to the extent that only the stalks remain
- (2) Later, when the vine has sprouted leaves, he removes the smaller shoots so that the main fruit-bearing branches receive adequate nourishment<sup>11,12</sup>.

The pruning activity of the divine vinedresser resembles that of His earthly counterpart. The parallelism of the first part of each statement ("every branch in me that does not bear fruit") is matched by corresponding divine action, be it judgment or discipline<sup>13</sup>. In the case of Jesus' followers, Judas was an example of the former, Peter of the latter. Pruning is also mentioned in texts such as Isaiah 18:5; Jeremiah. 5:10, Hebrews. 12:4–11.

**The vine's intended impact:** The Greek word κλήμα (*klēma*, "branch"- the shoot of a vine) found in the New Testament only in John 15:2, 4–6, also occurs in the LXX (Septuagint) in Numbers 13:23 and Ezekiel 17:6. ). κλήμα (*klēma*) stands as distinct from κλάδος (*klados* the "branch" of other trees). κλήμα (*klēma*) is used particularly of vine tendrils, although occasionally it refers to heavier branches as well. In Psalms 80:8-15 we see that God's intention was that the branches of this vine were supposed to give shade to much taller, "mightier" trees (allusion to the Cedars of Lebanon) thus **blesse all the nations**. There is no better an example of the seriousness the vinedresser takes with respect to covenant keeping than what we read in Psalms 80 which is a lament regarding the **pruning caused by King Solomon's state sponsored idolatry**.

## The Vine gets cut to the ground



**Concubines, Multiple Wives, Idolatry:** Solomon assumed the kingship (around 970–971 BC) and the state sponsored apostasy and idolatry he facilitated was due to his embracement of pagan god's worshipped by his many foreign wives and concubines. Yahweh (God, Elohim) had enough of this when idol worship was being carried out in the Temple. The result was serious pruning of the vine (Israel). God raised up two foreign enemies and one domestic foe against the kingdom during Solomon's

own lifetime. However, for David's sake, and for the sake of Solomon, the Lord refused to obliterate the nation completely during this period. In time God chose Jeroboam to punish Solomon for his idolatry which violated the heart of the covenant. God tore much of the kingdom from Solomon's heirs, leaving only one tribe, Judah, to be ruled by his successor. After

Solomon's death, Israel split into the Northern Kingdom under King Jeroboam and the Southern Kingdom under King Rehoboam. The division itself functioned as God's judgment—the nation of Israel was now divided against itself, leaving both kingdoms far more vulnerable to their enemies.



As a result of Solomon's state sponsored idolatry, the Shekinah glory of Yahweh departed from the temple when Israel went into exile due to disobedience<sup>36</sup>, but the Shekinah never returned to the second temple<sup>36</sup>. When the exile ended and the second temple was under construction, prophets like Haggai and Zechariah promised the people that God's glory would return to "fill the house" as it had in the first temple<sup>36</sup>. However, these expectations were not fulfilled historically. After the return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, the Shekinah did not return to fill the holy of holies in the Second Temple as it had the First Temple<sup>37</sup>. Traditional Jewish sources acknowledged this absence, listing five things present in the First Temple but missing from the Second: the Ark with its covering, the heavenly fire, the Divine Presence, Divine Inspiration, and the Urim and Thummim<sup>37</sup>.

Jewish interpreters recognized this gap and reinterpreted the prophecies eschatologically. Though Jews acknowledged the Shekinah as absent from the second Temple, they expected its return in the days of the Messiah<sup>38</sup>. Ezekiel's visions depicted the glory returning to dwell in a purified temple forever<sup>36</sup>, but scholars debate whether this refers to a future millennial temple or has already been fulfilled spiritually.

Christian interpretation identifies the return of God's glory with Jesus Christ, who "became flesh and dwelt among us," and believers "beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son"<sup>36</sup>—suggesting the Shekinah's ultimate return occurred not in a physical structure but in the incarnate Word.

The full consequences of Solomon's actions would unfold gradually—not until the time of Ezra and Nehemiah would Jerusalem begin to recuperate from the ultimate consequences of Solomon's actions. Eventually the ten Northern tribes would be all but obliterated.

Two hundred and fifty years later (around 722–720 BC) Psalm 80 was written, which along with Psalm 79, is a lament about the desiccation of the Northern tribes. The pain Solomon brought was long lasting. Hardly a positive portrayal of his choices.

Solomon's idolatry caused the "vine dresser" (Yahweh) to prune Israel to the root. Solomon surely was aware of the concept of Suzerain Vassal covenants and had a personal adviser named Zabud, who served as a priest in addition to his advisory role that could have reminded him of this. Moreover, there was a significant gap in Solomon's leadership structure. The list of Solomon's officials included no prophet either as an official or an adviser, and Solomon does not seem to have made room officially or unofficially for receiving counsel from a mentor with prophetic vision. His appreciation of Yahweh's covenant(s) was willingly neglected.



**Intelligence, wisdom and faith not intrinsically linked:** King Solomon is often labeled as wise but it appears his wisdom and his faith operated as separate capacities—the Bible distinguishes his incomparable intellect from his unreliable faith<sup>14,15</sup>. His mind was brilliant, but his soul was weak, and his intelligence, like Samson's strength, functioned as a godly gift that



didn't necessarily produce godliness<sup>14,15</sup>. It is interesting to consider that the common denominator between these men was carnality.

Solomon's exceptional intellect may have encouraged him to stray from God—why would he need divine guidance when he possessed such extraordinary mental capacity?<sup>14,15</sup> It's psychologically plausible that someone of Solomon's intellectual stature, standing at the height of knowledge and "wisdom", could lose spiritual energy and will in old age, becoming tolerant and indifferent toward what he once opposed, especially when pursuing other ends such as sexual gratification, heirs and companionship<sup>14,15</sup>.

The paradox deepens when considering what Solomon's idolatry entailed. Rather than practicing idolatry himself, Solomon allowed his many wives and concubines to exercise public idol-worship and favored it<sup>15</sup>. By officially patronizing different idolatries in Jerusalem—where the central sanctuary of Yahweh stood—Solomon effectively declared idol-worship equal in authorization to the worship of the true God<sup>14,15</sup>. This was state sponsored idolatry!

Ultimately, the biblical narrative sides with David, whose unswerving faith counted more than Solomon's "goodness and wisdom"<sup>14,15</sup>. Solomon's downfall illustrates that intellectual brilliance divorced from spiritual conviction and faithful obedience cannot sustain either personal integrity or national stability. His "wisdom" made him an exceptional administrator and builder, but it proved powerless against the spiritual compromise that undermined everything he had constructed.

**Eisegesis check:** An important concept we must understand is that in the Bible **description is not prescription** and **argument from silence is dubious** at best. To hold that multiple wives and/or concubines is permitted in scripture because it is described as having happened is straight up poor exegesis. We must examine the outcome to assess if it aligns with God's preceptive will. We can see the devastating impact of this thinking by examining the cause of Israel's captivity by the Babylonians. It had a direct connection to Solomon's choice to take many wives and concubines.

**Speaking of Fruitless branches:** Jesus delivered the "I am the true vine" discourse (John 15:1–17) after Judas Iscariot had departed to betray Him. John records that Judas leaves the Last Supper in John 13:30 ("As soon as Judas had taken the piece of bread, he went out. And it was night."), immediately after Jesus identifies him as the betrayer by giving him the bread.

The extended Farewell Discourse begins in John 13–14 (still in the upper room), continues in John 15–16 (including the vine metaphor in John 15), and concludes with Jesus' prayer in John 17. Multiple biblical commentaries and sources confirm that the vine teaching was addressed to the remaining eleven faithful disciples, with Judas already gone. The fruitless branch "taken away" (John 15:2) is often interpreted as referring to Judas, who appeared connected but bore no true fruit. Sources explicitly state: "Judas had already left to do his infamous deed (John 13:30)" when Jesus spoke of being the true vine. This timing underscores that the intimate teachings in John 15 (abiding in Christ, bearing fruit, and warnings of pruning/judgment) were for the true disciples, contrasting with Judas's betrayal.

The Biblical record seems to indicate that Judas partook of the last supper with Jesus then betrayed Him. However, scholars debate the specifics of his participation. Judas' attendance at the Last Supper is explicit in John 13:27 and Matthew 26:25 and is also implied in the Synoptics by the company of the Twelve or of the apostles<sup>1</sup>. The critical question concerns whether he consumed the bread and wine themselves. It is debated whether he was present for the entirety of the meal, and whether he partook of the bread and the wine<sup>16</sup>.

The Gospel accounts suggest different timings for Judas's departure. Since John does not record the institution of the Supper, it is open to question whether Judas went out after it or before it. Matthew and Mark put the institution after the announcement of the Betrayal, whereas according to John's account, Judas seems to have gone out immediately after the announcement, with the institution following afterward and chapter 14 being the Communion Address<sup>16</sup>.

This ambiguity matters theologically. If Judas departed before the institution of communion, he would not have partaken of the elements. If he remained through the institution, **the question becomes whether Jesus would have offered the cup and bread to one he knew would betray him—a tension the Gospel writers themselves seem to navigate carefully through their different narrative arrangements.**

**Greater than Solomon:** By indirect contrast; in John 15:5 Jesus makes clear that the branches in this symbolic discourse represent His followers. In the original instance of “in me” (John 15:2) it would include Judas. The reference in John 15:6 to branches that do not remain in the vine being picked up and thrown into the fire and burned closely resembles the thought of Ezekiel 15:1–8 (which calls back to Solomon’s idolatry and covenant violations), where the prophet likewise warned that a vine failing to produce fruit would be good for nothing but fire.

The repeated references “does not bear fruit . . . does bear fruit . . . bear even more fruit” (John 15:4, 5, 8) draw attention to the fact that the bearing of fruit is God’s primary creative (Genesis 1:11–12, 22, 28) and redemptive purpose (John 15:8, 16). The Old Testament prophets envisioned a time when Israel would “bud and blossom and fill all the world with fruit” (Isaiah 27:6; Hosea 14:4–8). Indeed, the bearing of fruit is the essential purpose of a vineyard<sup>6,7</sup>.

**Closer than sheep:** The “vine” metaphor illustrates the closely knit relationship that Jesus desires with His disciples and by extension us. **Even more than the “shepherd” imagery in John 10:1-18, which conveys the notion of the intimacy between Jesus and His “sheep,” the illustration of a vine and its branches focuses on the organic, vital connection that Jesus has with His followers,** a connection that will be made possible in the future (from the historical precrucifixion vantage point of Jesus and the disciples) through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.



The shepherd and vine allegories operate on fundamentally different relational levels, though both establish Jesus’s exclusive identity and authority.

In the shepherd image, Jesus “gives His life for the sheep and saves them<sup>39</sup>”, emphasizing a protective, sacrificial relationship where the shepherd acts “for” the sheep. The dynamic is directional—the shepherd provides, guides, and defends those under his care. This imagery highlights Jesus’s role as guardian and redeemer, with followers positioned as recipients of His care and leadership.

The vine allegory functions differently: the vine cannot show who and what Jesus is; rather the true vine is Jesus and no other<sup>39</sup>. Rather than depicting Jesus acting “for” His followers, the vine image emphasizes organic connection and mutual participation. Branches don’t receive care from the vine in the same way sheep receive care from a shepherd—instead, branches draw life “from” the vine itself. The relationship is constitutive: followers cannot exist spiritually apart from Jesus, just as branches cannot bear fruit disconnected from the vine’s life-giving resources.

The shepherd metaphor stresses Jesus’s “protective function”—His willingness to sacrifice himself. The vine metaphor stresses “vital union”—the necessity of remaining connected to receive spiritual sustenance. One emphasizes what Jesus “does for” believers; the other emphasizes what believers “must be in” Jesus to flourish. Together, they present both the security of his care and the necessity of abiding in Him—two essential dimensions of Christian discipleship that neither image alone could fully convey.

The agricultural and historical context would have been clearly understood by the disciples as all but Judas Iscariot were from the region of Galilee. They now needed to wrap their minds around the major paradigm shift whereby Jesus’ presence among them is about to be replaced by the Holy Spirit taking up residence in believers (cf. John 14:16–18). Like a grape vine, this spiritual relationship must be nurtured if Jesus’ followers are to remain connected to their exalted Lord.

Jesus identifies himself as “the true vine,” with God the Father as the vinedresser (John 15:1–17)—a claim that transforms Israel’s vineyard imagery into something radically new. Throughout the Old Testament, Israel was regularly depicted as the vine, and the nation consciously embraced this identity through temple decoration and coinage<sup>18</sup>. Yet whenever Scripture applied this figure to Israel, it consistently portrayed the vine under divine judgment for failing to produce fruit or bearing only corrupt fruit<sup>14</sup>. By declaring himself the “true vine,” Jesus positions himself in perfect communion and obedience to the Father—capable of producing genuine fruit, and the source of all good fruit<sup>17,18,19</sup>. We can surmise that the Sadducees, Pharisees and Scribes knew what Jesus was asserting thus their reactions were borne out of a perceived threat to their religious status quo.

## Description - Union with Christ

We must first start with the differentiation of body, soul and spirit before tackling a description of the union with Christ.

### Humans are distinct

*Genesis 2:7 - then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.*

Scholars interpret God’s breath into Adam as imparting the principle of life itself—the animating force that distinguishes humans from other creatures and connects them to the divine. The Hebrew understanding held that God’s breath (*ruah*, רוח) conveyed the mystery of life to humanity, and this breathing of life imparts to humans something distinctive of their higher nature compared to animals<sup>20</sup>. While humans became “a living soul” (*nephesh*, נֶפֶשׁ) and shared life with animals, humans alone received their life directly from God’s breath<sup>1</sup>. Woman, having been taken from the man, also receive this *nephesh*.

Some scholars emphasize the spiritual dimension more explicitly. Bible scholars note that in John 20:21–22, when Jesus breathed on the disciples saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit,” this directly parallels Genesis 2:7, and when the “cloud” of His breath filled the disciples, He imparted His Spirit to them and made them a new creation<sup>2</sup>. This suggests that God’s original breath communicated divine presence and spiritual capacity.

The core scholarly consensus treats the breath as conferring life-force and spiritual consciousness—the animating principle that makes humans living beings capable of relationship with God, fundamentally different from other creatures.

### Humans are trichotomous

It is my assertion that humans consist of three parts; body, soul and spirit, The distinctions between soul, and spirit remain contested across philosophical and theological traditions. Presented below is the trichotomous view.

- **Body:** The physical, outward part that interacts with the material world through senses.
- **Soul:** The psychological or "self" part, encompassing the mind (intellect/reason), will (choices/decisions), and emotions (feelings)<sup>21</sup>. It is the seat of personality, human consciousness, and earthly life. The soul is seen as tied to natural human experience. More broadly, when speaking of the soul we refer to the nature and destiny of the human being<sup>21,22</sup>. In Christian contexts, death separates body from soul, but it is the soul that remains while the body decomposes. While alive, the Christian, the contents of their soul and spirit is what they reflect to those around them and this progressively changes by the renewing of their minds<sup>21,22</sup>. It should be noted that “mind” in modern usage largely replaced earlier “soul” language which has created confusion for many. This came from sources such as Plato and Descartes who asserted that the “mind” is the immaterial core or essence of the human person—the ground of personal identity that survives the death of the body<sup>21,22</sup>.



- **Spirit:** The innermost, deepest part—the "God-consciousness." It is the faculty for communion with God, intuition of divine truths, and spiritual life. When a person is regenerated (born again), the Holy Spirit revives and indwells this human spirit. The human spirit functions differently than the soul but is impacted by it. The spirit is a deeper place within us, how we relate to the spiritual realm, and what determines our spiritual nature as humans<sup>20</sup>. The spirit is that part of our nature which tends to the purely rational, the lofty and divine<sup>21</sup>. The condition of a humans spirit can be impacted by the mind, emotions and will which as all operations of the soul.

In this framework:

- The spirit is described as deeper than the soul because it is the core where God directly interacts with the person. The soul is more outward (like a "middle layer"), mediating between the spirit and body, but it can be dominated by human reasoning, emotions, or self.
- The spirit directs how we relate to the spiritual realm. It is the organ for worship, prayer, intuition from God, and discerning spiritual realities (e.g., John 4:24: "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth").
- It determines our spiritual nature as humans. Humans are uniquely made in God's image with a spirit capable of eternal communion with Him (unlike animals, which have body and soul but no spirit in this view).
- It tends to the purely rational, the lofty and divine. Here, "purely rational" means a higher, intuitive reason aligned with God's wisdom (not mere intellectualism or emotions). It is "lofty" (elevated above earthly concerns) and "divine" (oriented toward holiness, transcendence, and God's perspective). This contrasts with the soul's more human, emotion-driven, or self-centered rationality.

Many Christians hold a dichotomous view (body and soul/spirit as essentially the same immaterial part), seeing "soul" and "spirit" as interchangeable in Scripture<sup>4</sup>. Others hold that a person is divisible into three distinct parts—body, soul, and spirit—believing the soul is a mediating presence between the material world of the body and the immaterial world of the spirit<sup>4</sup>. This view emphasizes practical spiritual growth: exercising the spirit through prayer, Bible reading, and surrender to break "soulish" independence. It is this later view that I personally ascribe to.

The reason I believe humans are trichotomous is the relative comparison to animals. If the spirit is an intrinsic component of the soul, then we must ask how we are to reconcile that with our observations of certain higher order animals. Whales for example can be said to be "soulish" in that they must have a mind else they could not construct specific songs we believe describe their experiences. They exhibit emotional behavior such as when a mother appears to grieve over her calf's death, and they clearly exhibit will in their choices. However, there is nothing in their behavior to suggest they have a spiritual nature as well as a "soulish" nature. A spirit nature is a uniquely human component and is not the byproduct of intelligence else we would see it in many higher order animals. Therefore, soul and spirit are distinct elements but do interact in the case of humans.

**Body, soul, spirit and death:** Every human is guaranteed to accomplish this one thing - they will die. For believers in Jesus Christ, the Bible indicates that after death their soul and spirit are taken to heaven because their sins are forgiven through receiving Christ as Savior<sup>24</sup>. For believers, death means being "away from the body and at home with the Lord"<sup>7</sup>, 2 Corinthians 5:8. However, this immediate departure to heaven is only temporary in one sense—the immaterial component departs while the lifeless body remains in the grave "sleeping" as the Apostle Paul pointed out in 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4. This metaphor of "sleep" primarily describes the appearance of the body after death, much like a sleeping person. Specifically for believers, this metaphor emphasizes that death should not be feared, as it is more like falling asleep - believers are said to "fall asleep" at death, and this sleep is accompanied by blessedness and a sense of Christ's presence.

At the resurrection of believers, the physical body is resurrected, glorified, and then reunited with the soul and spirit<sup>7</sup>. This reunited and glorified body-soul-spirit will be the possession of believers for eternity in the new heavens and new earth<sup>7</sup>. In this new reality the bible presents the soul and spirit as now unified. However, those whom by free will choice have opted for alienation from God in this reality will be granted their request for the eternity reality every human will encounter. They will be aware of their choice and the horrors of the absolute absence of God's restraining influence of evil will for eternity torment them.

**Body, soul, spirit while alive:** Many people (even Christians) live primarily from the soul (emotions, will, intellect) rather than the revived spirit. This leads to a shallower spiritual life, reliance on human effort, or confusion between psychological experiences and true divine communion. True depth comes when the spirit dominates, allowing God's life to flow through the soul and body.

This view draws from verses like:

- 1 Thessalonians 5:23 → Distinguishes spirit, soul, and body.
- Hebrews 4:12 → God's Word divides soul and spirit (implying they are distinct yet closely intertwined).
- Romans 8:16 → The Spirit bears witness with our spirit.

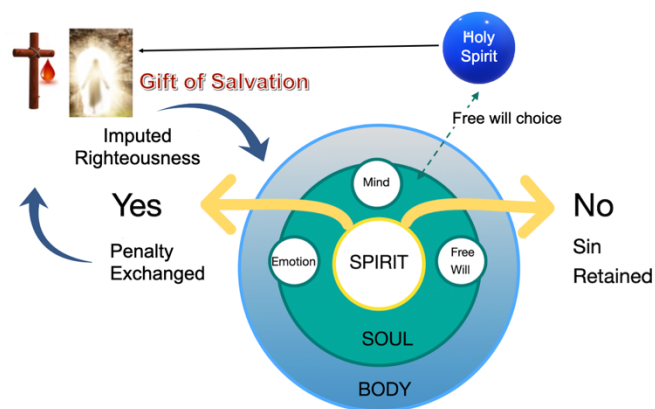
### Body, soul, spirit and regeneration:

Regeneration takes place in a region of the human soul deeper than conscious awareness—where spiritual death originates, beneath the will itself<sup>26</sup>. This distinction matters because in our natural state we possess the ability to will, yet we cannot will what pleases God indicating the problem lies at a level beyond conscious choice.

The Holy Spirit's sovereign work in the human soul precedes all conscious spiritual exercises—including sorrow for sin, faith in Christ, and love toward God<sup>26,27</sup>. The life-giving power of the Holy Spirit operates like wind, beyond our control and understanding, apprehended only in its effects<sup>28</sup>. This hidden operation explains why God works in us to will, and must therefore work at a level deeper than the will itself<sup>28</sup>.

However, the process doesn't end there. While humans are passive in the initial impartation of life—when the moral faculties of the soul are recovered from depravity and a holy ruling disposition is established—they become active in the initial exercise of this holy disposition<sup>8</sup>. Regeneration remains incomplete until repentance and faith are wrought in the soul, and these should be understood as part of regeneration rather than merely its fruits<sup>28</sup>.

Rather than regeneration creating new faculties, the Holy Spirit enlivens the existing powers of the soul, fitting them to enjoy God and commune with Him<sup>9</sup> through the spiritual component of human composition. This is now possible since the believer's spirit is conditioned by the Holy Spirit's work in the deepest regions of the soul.



## Union with Christ

*Romans 8:1-2 ESV* - <sup>1</sup>There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are **in Christ Jesus**.

<sup>2</sup> For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free **in Christ Jesus** from the law of sin and death.

Union with Christ describes the nature of believers' personal relationship with Jesus<sup>27</sup>. Rather than a single, monolithic concept, the doctrine encompasses several theological dimensions.

Paul articulates this reality through the language of being "in Christ" and of Christ being "in you," though the language carries a mysterious, spiritual quality<sup>28,29</sup>. Using circumcision and baptism as metaphors, Paul depicts believers as so intimately joined with Christ through faith that they participate in His death and resurrection, with His redemptive work now applied to them<sup>28,29</sup>. This union spans past, present, and future; believers have died and risen with Christ, now possess resurrection life, and will ultimately share in His glory<sup>30,31</sup>.

**The role of faith:** The doctrine operates through multiple dimensions. **Regeneration precedes faith which functions as the mechanism through which believers unite with Christ, while Christ himself accomplishes this union through the Holy Spirit<sup>28,29</sup>**. Unlike Eastern religious concepts of absorption into "the One," union with Christ maintains personal distinction—believers' identities are neither threatened nor diminished but rather united to him in intimacy and shared life<sup>30</sup>. By the Holy Spirit, those united with Christ are being conformed to His image, including conformity to his holiness and participation in both His rewards and His suffering<sup>27</sup>.

**Union awareness:** The spiritual dimension of union with Christ highlights the believer's conscious, experiential communion with Him. **This union is rooted in personal encounters with the Holy Spirit through Scripture and is nurtured primarily through prayer, contemplation, and worship<sup>4</sup>**.

More comprehensively, union with Christ originates in God's eternal covenantal purpose, is objectively established through Christ's redemptive work, is entered personally by trusting faith, progressively sanctifies believers by transforming them into Christ's likeness, and draws them into an intimate, loving relationship with Him that extends into eternity<sup>4</sup>.

**How the union works:** The relationship Jesus establishes with His followers operates through intimate connection rather than external obligation. Just as branches cannot bear fruit apart from the vine, believers cannot produce spiritual fruit without remaining in Christ; apart from him, they accomplish nothing (John 15:1–17). **This "remaining" in the vine signifies continuance in union with Jesus<sup>16</sup>—a union sustained through specific practices. Remaining means allowing Christ's words to dwell within you and guide your life, living consciously in his love, and expressing genuine responsive love through obedience<sup>16</sup>**.

Life itself flows from vital union with Christ, just as a vine ministers life to its emerging grapes<sup>3</sup>. The fruit produced by such remaining encompasses all manifestations of genuine faith<sup>16</sup>—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22–23). **The Father actively prunes branches that bear fruit, refining them to produce even greater abundance (John 15:1–17), while keeping Christ's commandments demonstrates that you abide in His love, mirroring how Christ himself remains in the Father's love through obedience (John 15:1–17)**.

<sup>1</sup> L. Scott Kellum, *The Unity of the Farewell Discourse: The Literary Integrity of John 13:31–16:33*. Library of New Testament Studies (JSNTSup) 256. London: T&T Clark International, 2004: 193–196

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Nelson, *Spreading the Light of God's Word into Your Life*; (edited by Earl D. Radmacher - General Editor, Ronald B. Allen - Old Testament Editor), and H. Wayne House - New Testament Editor), with contributions from over 40 evangelical scholars; Thomas Nelson, 1999: 72–76

<sup>3</sup> Isa. 5:1–7; 27:2–6; cf. Ps. 80:8–16; Jer. 2:21; 6:9; 12:10–13; Ezek. 15:1–8; 17:5–10; 19:10–14; Hos. 10:1–2; 14:7

<sup>4</sup> D. A. Carson's, *The Gospel according to John. Pillar New Testament Commentary*. Leicester: InterVarsity Press / Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991. 513.

- <sup>5</sup> Rodney A. Whitacre, *John. IVP New Testament Commentary Series, vol. 4.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999
- <sup>6</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, *he Missions of Jesus and the Disciples according to the Fourth Gospel: With Implications for the Contemporary Church.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998: 166–167.
- <sup>7</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (NICNT). Revised edition.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995: 593-594
- <sup>8</sup> Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary.* Translated by John Vriend. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997: 515
- <sup>9</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *John. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 36. Revised edition.* Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999: 272
- <sup>10</sup> Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John. Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 4.* Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press (A Michael Glazier Book), 1998: 419 Raymond E. Brown's monumental commentary:
- <sup>11</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John (XIII–XXI).* Anchor Bible Series, vol. 29A. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970
- <sup>12</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John. Translated by David Smith and G. A. Kon. Vol. 3: Commentary on Chapters 13–21.* New York: Crossroad / London: Burns & Oates, 1990: 97
- <sup>13</sup> J. Carl Laney, *John. Moody Gospel Commentary series.* Chicago: Moody Press, 1989: 58-60
- <sup>14</sup> David Plotz, *Good Book: The Bizarre, Hilarious, Disturbing, Marvelous, and Inspiring Things I Learned When I Read Every Single Word of the Bible* (New York, NY: HarperCollins e-books, 2009), 168.
- <sup>15</sup> John Peter Lange et al., *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: 1 Kings* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 128–129.
- <sup>16</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John (I–XII) and (XIII–XXI), Anchor Bible, vol. 29.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966: 675–676
- <sup>17</sup> Craig J. Hazen, *Fearless Prayer: Why We Don't Ask and Why We Should* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2018), 68–69.
- <sup>18</sup> Herbert E. Ryle, *The Book of Genesis in the Revised Version with Introduction and Notes*, The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), 30.
- <sup>19</sup> Paul Manwaring and Bill Johnson, *What on Earth Is Glory? A Practical Approach to a Glory-Filled Life* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2011).
- <sup>20</sup> Edwin Majone, *God's Next of Kin: Spiritual Genetics Defined* (Lake Mary, FL: Creation House, 2016).
- <sup>21</sup> Kelly James Clark, Richard Lints, and James K. A. Smith, *Mind/Soul/Spirit*, in 101 Key Terms in Philosophy and Their Importance for Theology (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 53.
- <sup>22</sup> John M'Clintock and James Strong, *Soul (1)*, in Cyclopædia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1880), 9:890.
- <sup>23</sup> Andrew Farley, *Heaven Is Now: Awakening Your Five Spiritual Senses to the Wonders of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012).
- <sup>24</sup> Got Questions Ministries, *Got Questions? Bible Questions Answered* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2002–2013).
- <sup>25</sup> Thomas Paul Simmons, *A Systematic Study of Bible Doctrine: A Logical Arrangement and a Diligent Treatment of the Teachings of God's Holy Word*, Systematic, Calvinistic, Baptist, Premillennial (Russell, KY: The Baptist Examiner, 1955), 283–285.
- <sup>26</sup> Arthur Walkington Pink, *The Holy Spirit* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, n.d.).
- <sup>27</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, John, ed. Ralph P. Martin and David A. Hubbard, *Word Biblical Themes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 1989), 93–94.
- <sup>28</sup> Gordon J. Keddie, *A Study Commentary on John: John 13–21, EP Study Commentary* (Darlington, England; Auburn, MA: Evangelical Press, 2001), 151.



- <sup>29</sup> Karelynn Gerber Ayayo, *Judas Iscariot*, in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).
- <sup>30</sup> James Hastings et al., in *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), 502–503.
- <sup>31</sup> Adam Copenhaver and Jeffrey D. Arthurs, *Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary for Biblical Preaching and Teaching*, Kerux Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Ministry, 2022), 46.
- <sup>32</sup> Sung Rual Choi, *Union with Christ: Re-Reading Calvin in Korean-American Reformed Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2023).
- <sup>33</sup> Susanne Calhoun, *Union with Christ*, Lexham Survey of Theology, ed. Mark Ward et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018).
- <sup>24</sup> A. J. Spence, *Union with Christ*, *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic*, ed. Martin Davie et al. (London; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; InterVarsity Press, 2016), 931.
- <sup>35</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans publishing co., 1938)
- <sup>36</sup> Raymond B. Dillard, *Glory*, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1:871–872.
- <sup>37</sup> Randall Price, *Rose Guide to the Temple* (Rose Publishing, 2021).
- <sup>38</sup> John M'Clintock and James Strong, *Shechi'nah*, *Cyclopædia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1880), 9:637.
- <sup>39</sup> Ronald L. Eisenberg, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 515–516.
- <sup>40</sup> Skip Heitzig, “Exodus 19:1–20:7,” in *Skip Heitzig Sermon Archive* (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife Corporation, 2018).
- <sup>41</sup> Kerry Trahan, *A Complete Guide to Understanding the Dispensationalism Controversy* (Port Neches, TX: Disciple of Jesus Ministries, Inc., 2007), 249–251.
- <sup>42</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Judaism,” in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 2:1235.
- <sup>43</sup> George A. Barton, *The Religions of the World* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1919), 88–90.
- <sup>44</sup> Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *From God to Us: How We Got Our Bible* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2012), 264.

## Transformation of Believers

**Mind and function:** Union with Christ fundamentally transforms the believer's mental and spiritual functioning (Romans 8:5–6, Romans 12:2, Colossians 3:2, 1 Corinthians 2:16). The Christian mind gains access to new possibilities through this union, and as the Holy Spirit works sanctification in the believer's life, the thoughts and realizations formed in the Christian mind are deeply shaped by that union with Christ (2 Cor. 3:18, Gal 2:20)<sup>1,2,3</sup>.



Robert Letham, a prominent Reformed theologian specializing in systematic and historical theology, contends that this transformation involves receiving a “newness of mind” through union with Christ<sup>1</sup>. Millard J. Erickson, a leading evangelical systematic theologian known for his balanced engagement with Scripture, indicates that the believer's cognitive and emotional life becomes oriented toward Christ's presence and power. Since Christ designed and created human nature, including the psyche itself, He can affect thoughts and feelings from within in ways we do not fully comprehend<sup>4,5</sup>.

**Active process:** Scripture clearly teaches both the profound reality of union with Christ (e.g., the frequent “in Christ” phrases in Paul’s letters) and the renewal of the mind (Rom 12:2; Eph 4:23; Col 3:10). These two truths are closely related, though not identical. Union with Christ provides the foundational vitality and enabling power for renewal, while the actual renewing of the mind is presented in Scripture as an active, progressive process in which believers are called to participate.

**Automatic and passive:** Yet this renewal is not solely automatic or passive. The key passages on mind renewal are framed as imperatives, calling believers to active engagement: “be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom 12:2), “be renewed in the spirit of your minds” (Eph 4:23), and having “put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Col 3:10). Paul further urges believers to “set your minds on things that are above” (Col 3:2) and to “take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor 10:5). The primary means God has ordained for this ongoing renewal is deliberate, Scripture-saturated thinking: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Col 3:16).

**Transformed, not erased:** Importantly, this transformation preserves personal identity and agency. The union involves the believer’s spirit and the Holy Spirit in intimate communion without extinguishing either<sup>12</sup>. The believer does not lose selfhood but experiences shared life with Christ in which personal identity is neither threatened nor diminished<sup>13</sup>. The mind becomes progressively aligned with Christ’s perspective and purposes—not through coercion, but through the Holy Spirit’s transformative work that gradually conforms thought, desire, and will to Christ’s own.

**Result of the Union:** At regeneration, union with Christ brings an immediate spiritual illumination: what was once indecipherable in Scripture begins to make sense, and the believer receives a regenerated capacity to comprehend spiritual truth. This is a genuine inward work of the Spirit through the vital connection with Christ—much like a branch receiving life from the vine (John 15). Christ’s life flows into the believer, renewing the inner nature and imparting spiritual strength. This produces a new spiritual vitality that manifests in the terrestrial realm, though its full dimension remains unseen until eternity<sup>9,10,11</sup>.

**The Holy Spirit’s role:** The Spirit’s ongoing task is to renew the mind through the gospel, and this renewal of mind and heart transforms character and behavior because of the central place the mind holds in human personality orientation, attitudes, and beliefs<sup>6</sup>. The Spirit’s renewing work continues as believers trust in what Christ has accomplished and seek to reflect the practical consequences of their union with Christ in His death and resurrection<sup>6</sup>.

For theologian T. F. Torrance, reconciliation through the incarnation entails an ontological union between humankind and God, resulting in thinking of God rightly<sup>7</sup>. As believers grow in their relationship with God, His character increasingly shapes their thoughts, desires, and actions, causing them to reflect His love, kindness, forgiveness, and justice<sup>8</sup>.

**Our role:** Thus, union with Christ establishes the foundation, provides the capacity and the Spirit’s indwelling presence, and supplies the vital power—like sap flowing from vine to branch. Renewal of the mind, however, emerges as believers responsibly cooperate with that grace through intentional engagement with God’s Word. The transformation is neither purely external instruction nor purely mystical inflow; it is the fruit of a living union expressed through active obedience.

A common testimony among believers is that thoughts, affections, opinions, and impulses now pass through a theological framework erected by the Holy Spirit—something absent before regeneration. Human will plays a role, as believers choose to yield to or resist the Spirit’s renewing work. This is not to be confused with anything the believer does to control the work of the Holy Spirit. The party here undergoing change (or not) is the human being, not the Holy Spirit.

- <sup>1</sup> Nathan A. Finn and Keith S. Whitfield, *The Christian Life, in Confessing Christ: An Invitation to Baptist Dogmatics*, ed. Steven A. McKinion, Christine E. Thornton, and Keith S. Whitfield (Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2024), 264.
- <sup>2</sup> Yohanes Bambang Mulyono, *Transformation in Theosis: Embracing the Divine Nature* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2025). [See here.]
- <sup>3</sup> Susanne Calhoun, *Union with Christ, Lexham Survey of Theology*, ed. Mark Ward et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018).
- <sup>4</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 877–879.
- <sup>5</sup> Robert Letham, *Union with Christ: In Scripture, History, and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011), 99, 124.
- <sup>6</sup> David Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness*, ed. D. A. Carson, New Studies in Biblical Theology (England; Downers Grove, IL: Apollos; InterVarsity Press, 1995), 1:133.
- <sup>7</sup> Andrew Purves, *Exploring Christology and Atonement: Conversations with John McLeod Campbell, H. R. Mackintosh and T. F. Torrance* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 230/
- <sup>8</sup> Yohanes Bambang Mulyono, *Transformation in Theosis: Embracing the Divine Nature* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2025).
- <sup>9</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 3:34, 3:218.
- <sup>10</sup> Oliver D. Crisp and Kyle C. Strobel, Jonathan Edwards: *An Introduction to His Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 162.
- <sup>11</sup> Chris Chun, Kyle C. Strobel, and Kenneth P. Minkema, *Regeneration, Revival, and Creation: Religious Experience and the Purposes of God in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2020)
- <sup>12</sup> Susanne Calhoun, *Union with Christ, Lexham Survey of Theology*, ed. Mark Ward et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018).
- <sup>14</sup> Robert Brennan, *Describing the Hand of God: Divine Agency and Augustinian Obstacles to the Dialogue between Theology and Science* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2015)

## Union and Justification

Union with Christ functions as the overarching framework through which believers receive justification<sup>6</sup>. Rather than justification standing as an isolated forensic declaration, it operates within the broader context of union with Christ, where all redemptive benefits flow to those joined to him<sup>6</sup>.

**Forensic Nature of Justification:** Justification operates as a legal declaration of righteousness rather than an actual impartation of it, describing what God declares about the believer rather than what he does to change the believer's character<sup>1</sup>. This declaration effects no actual change in the sinner's nature but constitutes an instantaneous change of status before God, not a gradual transformation<sup>1</sup>.

Justification fundamentally represents a divine declaration that a believer stands righteous before God, referring to a person's status apart from their moral condition<sup>2</sup>. Importantly, this is not a legal fiction where God merely pretends believers are righteous; rather, God acts to satisfy His justice and prove His faithfulness to His promises<sup>2</sup>.

**Imputation of Christ's Righteousness:** The doctrine of imputation as legal credit: Imputation is essential to a biblical understanding of justification<sup>3</sup>. The Reformers insisted that the formal cause of justification is the righteousness and obedience of Christ imputed to believers by faith alone<sup>3</sup>. Rather than overlooking sin, God provides a mechanism through which the sinner's debt is addressed—the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, encompassing both His perfect life and His all-sufficient atoning sacrifice, to the believer<sup>4</sup>.

Justification is not an act of legal fiction where God turns a blind eye toward sin and declares believers to be what they are not<sup>5</sup>. That would directly clash with His attribute of justice. Rather, justification can be understood as both a declarative and constitutive act, with righteousness constituted in believers through imputation for “righteous” to be justly declared of them<sup>5</sup>.

**God’s Attributes in Perfect Alignment:** God’s justice has a strong retributive sense because it is essential to Him, and as the moral standard of the universe, God is the law itself. When God judges, He remains true to His own perfect moral demands, which means He remains true to Himself<sup>6</sup>. For sinners to be declared just, justification before God requires that sin is fully paid and that believers have a perfect righteousness by imputation<sup>6</sup>. This framework ensures that mercy, grace, justice, love, and sovereignty operate in perfect harmony rather than in tension against one another.

**Vertical and Horizontal Dimensions:** Justification also possesses a covenantal dimension: while vertical and forensic regarding individual status before God, it is also horizontal and pertains to believers’ legitimate place in God’s covenant community, establishing Gentiles as members alongside Israel.<sup>2</sup> Justification and sanctification are logically linked rather than conceptually identical—the basis for justification is not sanctification, yet those united with Christ receive both righteous status and the calling to live as slaves of righteousness.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 612.

<sup>2</sup> Michael F. Bird, *Justification*, in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

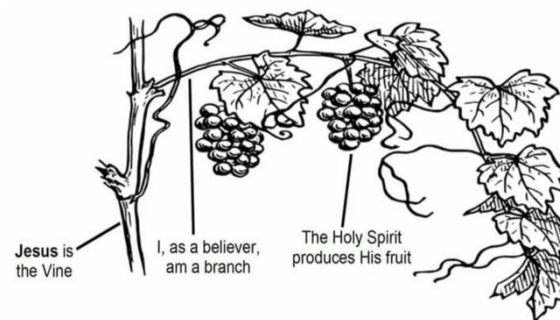
<sup>3</sup> James R. White, *The Roman Catholic Controversy* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), 143–144.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin DeYoung, *Daily Doctrine: A One-Year Guide to Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2024), 254–255.

<sup>5</sup> James R. White, *The Roman Catholic Controversy* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), 144.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen J. Wellum, *Behold, the Lamb of God: Theology Proper and the Inseparability of Penal-Substitutionary Atonement from Forensic Justification and Imputation*, *The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls: Justification in Biblical, Theological, Historical, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. Matthew Barrett (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 355–356.

## The Holy Spirit’s role in the Union – a closer look



The Holy Spirit affects union with Christ through indwelling the church and its members<sup>3</sup> operating as the bond of this union<sup>4</sup>. This happens not through abstract means but through concrete channels: the Holy Spirit develops union with Christ through faith, working via the Word, sacraments, and prayer<sup>3</sup>.

Prayer and being in the Word are self-evident. For example, a deep dive study of the Lord’s Prayer template reveals so much more than is on the surface when this practice is Holy Spirit directed. This in turn deepens our understanding of the union with Christ. Repeating the practice



feeds a spiritual growth loop. This study we are doing here on the Union of Christ is another example of the Holy Spirit's work in the practices we employ.

As well as prayer and studying the Word of God there are two sacrament practices we recognize:

- **Baptism** initiates union with Christ. Through baptism, believers are baptized into Christ Jesus and into His death, buried with him by baptism into death, and united with him in a death like his<sup>4</sup>. For Paul, baptism represents the means by which believers begin to participate in Jesus' sacrifice and by which that sacrifice is applied to them<sup>4</sup>.
- **Communion** sustains and deepens this union. If baptism initiates the believer into the sacrificial life of Christ, that life is sustained by regularly receiving the bread and cup of Communion, through which believers participate continually in the sacrifice of Christ in a very physical and tangible way<sup>4</sup>. The Lord's Supper functions as the covenant rite or sacrament of continuance in Christ and His body, designed to help Christians nurture, deepen and strengthen their relationship or union with Christ and with one another in him<sup>5</sup>.

The mechanism connecting these sacraments to union with Christ operates through the Holy Spirit. The sacraments function as powers that come forth from the Body of Christ, by which the Holy Spirit works in the church to bring the sacrifice of Jesus to bear upon God's people in ever increasing and powerful ways, causing union with Christ to be deepened<sup>4</sup>. Rather than operating mechanically or automatically, the Christian's incorporation into Christ through baptism involves both the outward sacramental rite of initiation and the inner means of appropriation—repentance and faith in Jesus as Messiah, Savior and Lord<sup>5</sup>.

The mechanism itself is deeply relational. The union is affected by the Holy Spirit, and Christ dwells in us by the Spirit<sup>2</sup>. Rather than a mystical dissolution of identity, this represents a union of two spirits that does not extinguish either of them<sup>2</sup>. Unlike concepts of unity in Eastern religions that erase distinction, union with Christ maintains the believer's identity while uniting them to Christ in intimacy and shared life<sup>3</sup>.

Crucially, Christ's life flows into believers, renewing their inner nature and imparting spiritual strength—just as a branch cannot bear fruit without receiving life from the vine<sup>2</sup>. Through the Holy Spirit's agency, Christians are united with Christ in His life, death, resurrection, and glorification, receiving the benefits and rewards of His obedience<sup>3</sup>.

This union operates both individually and corporately. Christ's church is His body, and by the Spirit, Christians have become the body of Christ, joined to one another and to him as parts of a body are joined to their head<sup>3</sup>. Importantly, while union with Christ requires faith and our participation, it is not automatic or under our control—it is initiated and developed by the Holy Spirit<sup>1</sup>. The result points forward: this union will eventually lead believers to become more Christ-like, as the gospel intends to make us imagers of God<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Robert Letham, *The Holy Spirit* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2023), 240–241.

<sup>2</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 881–882.

<sup>3</sup> Susanne Calhoun, *Union with Christ*, *Lexham Survey of Theology*, ed. Mark Ward et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Jason J. Stellman, *The Destiny of the Species: Man and the Future That Pulls Him* (Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson and J.I. Packer, in *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 698.

## It is all predicated on Jesus

The critical theological distinction concerns what grounds justification.

Though believers exist in union with Christ, His imputed righteousness alone constitutes the basis of their justified status<sup>5</sup>.

This matters because justification rests neither on the believer's identity or actions nor on God's transformative work within them, but exclusively on Christ's perfect obedience and satisfaction credited to them<sup>5</sup>.

Luther's distinction between owning and possessing illustrates this: just as borrowing a library book means possessing but not owning it, believers possess Christ's righteousness without owning it—it remains eternally His, freely given to believers<sup>5</sup>.



Reformed theology safeguards this relationship by insisting that union with Christ does not mean God's internal work becomes the means of justification; rather, Christ Himself justifies through faith, which directs believers away from themselves toward Him alone<sup>6</sup>. This positioning guards against two errors:

- A. The Lutheran tendency to treat justification as purely external with union following afterward as a consequence<sup>6</sup>
- B. The Roman Catholic conflation of justification with sanctification, where infused righteousness contributes to one's justified standing<sup>6</sup>.

Union with Christ functions as the ground of salvation including justification, whereby believers receive a right standing before God through incorporation into Christ Himself, with all His actions becoming theirs as God considers them present in Christ at the moment He acted<sup>6</sup>.

**Union resilience:** Regarding this union, there can be no permanent divorce between Christ and the believing soul.<sup>7</sup> This permanence rests on several theological foundations.

- A. The union itself is constitutive. That is to say believers are incorporated into Christ as inseparably as leaven mixed into dough transforms the dough's nature, making Christ and believers one unified whole.<sup>7</sup> For this bond to break, the Holy Spirit would have to abandon either Christ (which is impossible) or believers (which the Spirit's covenant promise prevents).<sup>8</sup>
- B. Union with Christ carries soteriological guarantees. Those in union with Christ face no condemnation, possess eternal life, and have passed from death to life.<sup>8</sup> Because Christ lives, those united to him will also live—both the life of grace in the present and the life of glory hereafter.<sup>8</sup> These are not provisional benefits that might be revoked; they flow from the believer's fundamental standing in Christ.

Sin may temporarily create apparent separation between Christ and the believer, but it cannot affect final separation.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, peace may be interrupted through sin, Satan, the world, or God's withdrawal of comfort, yet it shall never be finally lost.<sup>7</sup> The union remains intact even when its subjective experience or the believer's assurance wavers.

This reflects the Reformed emphasis that union with Christ is fundamentally **objective**—grounded in God's eternal counsel and Christ's redemptive work—rather than merely **subjective**, dependent on the believer's fluctuating faith or obedience or “feelings du jour”. Our union with Christ is secured not by our constancy but by Christ's person and the Spirit's indwelling presence.

<sup>1</sup> Jack Kilcrease, *The Nature of Justification*, in *Lexham Survey of Theology*, ed. Mark Ward et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Michael F. Bird, *Justification*, in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Anthony T. Evans, *The Accomplishments of the Cross (Part 3)*, in *Tony Evans Sermon Archive* (Tony Evans, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Angela Carpenter, *Grace and Social Ethics: Gift as the Foundation of Our Life Together* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2024), 23.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Barrett, *Is Justification by Faith Alone Still the Dividing Line?*, *Credo: Justification: The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls* (January 2014) (Credo Magazine, 2014), 4:1:63–64.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Letham, *Union with Christ, Scripture, History, and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011), 82–83.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Brooks, *The Complete Works of Thomas Brooks*, ed. Alexander Balloch Grosart (Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; G. Herbert, 1867), 234.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Keach, *Sermon XI, in A Golden Mine Opened: Or, the Glory of God's Rich Grace Displayed in the Mediator to Believers: And His Direful Wrath against Impenitent Sinners*, (London: Printed for the author, 1694), 230–231.

## Union with Christ and being ‘born again’

Union with Christ and being born again are **inseparably connected but not identical**—they represent different dimensions of a single salvific reality. Regeneration and union must never be separated; you cannot be born again without being in Christ, and you are born again because you are in Christ<sup>1</sup>. The relationship is one of mutual dependence rather than chronological sequence. Regeneration and union must always be considered together and at the same time because the one depends upon the other and leads to the other; they are mutually self-supporting<sup>1</sup>.

The important nuance about their relationship is as follows.

- A. Union with Christ occurs through the new creature in us—the divine nature from the Spirit of holiness—and no person without regeneration can have union with Christ<sup>2</sup>.
- B. Regeneration is an effect of union with Christ rather than its cause<sup>2</sup>.

This means union with Christ is the foundational reality, while regeneration describes what happens within that union.

A helpful distinction emerges regarding awareness and experience. While the union is affected when the sinner is renewed by the operation of the Holy Spirit, the believer does not become cognizant of it and does not actively cultivate it until the conscious operation of faith begins<sup>2</sup>. So, regeneration—the spiritual rebirth—occurs at the moment of union, but the believer’s conscious realization and active appropriation of that union develop through faith.

Union with Christ stands at the ground of both regeneration and justification; it is the great fact of subjective Christianity whereby we receive the atonement, and this union is begun in regeneration, completed in conversion, declared in justification, and proved in sanctification and perseverance<sup>3</sup>. In this framework, being born again represents the initial transformation that occurs within union with Christ, not a separate experience that precedes or follows it.

<sup>1</sup> David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God the Holy Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997), 105.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Vickers, *Discovering the Christian Mind: Reason and Belief in Christian Confession* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907), 795.

## History of the doctrine of union with Christ?

The doctrine of union with Christ has a complex theological history marked by significant variation in how theologians have understood and articulated this central Christian concept.

Medieval theologians including Thomas Aquinas and Bernard of Clairvaux developed sophisticated treatments of union with Christ long before the Reformation<sup>1</sup>. Thomas Aquinas grounded union in the incarnation itself, arguing that Christ's two natures establish a connection between God and humanity<sup>1</sup>. Bernard of Clairvaux famously expounded the doctrine through his sermons on the Song of Songs, discussing union in terms of a twofold grace involving repentance and perseverance<sup>1</sup>. Jean Gerson's medieval treatise catalogued multiple understandings of union, including Peter Lombard's view that the Holy Spirit's indwelling enables sinners to love God, creating mutual indwelling between God and humanity<sup>1</sup>.

Throughout Christian history, two problematic interpretations have emerged alongside more orthodox formulations.

- A. Roman Catholic theology developed a sacramental view, particularly through Thomas Aquinas and Pope Eugenius IV, positioning the Eucharist as the primary means of achieving union with Christ<sup>2</sup>.
- B. A second problematic trajectory involved absorptive mysticism, exemplified in figures like John Eckhart, where union threatened to collapse the distinction between Creator and creature through the believer's absorption into God<sup>2</sup>. This concern connects to the doctrine of deification, which the Greek Fathers developed from 2 Peter 1:4, proposing that believers would become partakers of the divine nature<sup>2</sup>.

Despite the doctrine's centrality to Christian theology, most systematic treatments have neglected it—a reaction against exaggerated mysticism<sup>3</sup>. The Reformation sought to correct theological errors rather than create entirely new doctrines, and this applies to union with Christ as well<sup>1</sup>. The doctrine's development thus reflects ongoing attempts to preserve genuine spiritual communion with Christ while avoiding both sacramental reductionism and the dissolution of human-divine distinction.

<sup>1</sup> J. V. Fesko, *Union with Christ*, in *Reformation Theology, A Systematic Summary*, ed. Matthew Barrett (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 426–427.

<sup>2</sup> James Leo Garrett Jr., *Systematic Theology*, Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 362, 364.

<sup>3</sup> Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907), 795.

## Differing views on union with Christ?

Several distinct perspectives exist on union with Christ, each emphasizing different dimensions of how believers relate to Christ.

Different theological traditions have concentrated on various strands of this theme, which has at least five aspects to it<sup>1</sup>.

- The **incarnational view**, particularly emphasized in Eastern Orthodox theology, stresses that in Christ God becomes one with us in order to make us one with him; he stooped to take our nature, in order that we might be restored to become partakers of His nature<sup>2</sup>. This perspective grounds union in Christ's assumption of human nature itself.
- The **covenantal approach** understands union through the framework of God's covenant promises. The New Testament takes up the Old Testament theme of the covenant between God and humanity as the framework within which the Christian's and the church's relationship with God through Christ is understood, with Christians united with him in a covenant relationship grounded on better promises and a surer foundation through Christ's work on our behalf<sup>2</sup>.
- Within Reformed theology, this develops into **federal union**, where men and women are dealt with by God 'in Christ' in a way that parallels His dealings with mankind 'in Adam', with God dealing with the many through a representative man (or 'federal head') in each case<sup>2</sup>.



- **Reformed covenant theology** treats union comprehensively: Union with Christ is interpreted not as a discrete step in the order of salvation but as a comprehensive concept that embraces the whole scope of salvation from eternity past to eternity future<sup>2</sup>. This view encompasses election, calling, regeneration, justification, sanctification, and glorification as aspects of a single overarching union.
- Finally, the **mystical or spiritual perspective**, stressed particularly by the mystical, pietist and charismatic traditions, emphasizes that the Christian is united to Christ in his or her conscious experience, rooted in the mystery of the encounter of the spirit of man and the Spirit of God or of Christ<sup>3</sup>. This tradition prioritizes personal devotion, prayer, and intimate relational experience with Christ.

<sup>1</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson and J.I. Packer, in *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 698.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce A. Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997), 319.

<sup>3</sup> A. J. Spence, *Union with Christ*, in *New Dictionary of Theology*, Historical and Systematic, ed. Martin Davie et al. (London; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press; InterVarsity Press, 2016), 931.

## Moving beyond intellectual assent

Deepening our union with Christ involves moving beyond intellectual awareness into lived experience—recognizing what’s already true about one’s position in Christ while allowing the Spirit to make that reality increasingly tangible in one’s daily life.

Union with Christ centers on Christ himself rather than on our own spiritual achievements or internal experiences. This means anchoring our awareness in Christ’s person, work, and promises rather than scrutinizing our own spiritual progress<sup>1</sup>. Since even mature believers fall short of Christ’s holiness, focusing primarily on ourselves for assurance undermines our connection with Him<sup>1</sup>.

The Spirit doesn’t merely apply Christ’s finished work to you at conversion; He continuously empowers you to experience the benefits of the gospel in progressively deeper ways throughout your life<sup>2</sup>. This involves:

- **Praying**—as Paul did (Ephesians 3:14–19) that you would experience what you already know intellectually to be true, allowing the Spirit to lead you into deeper awareness and experience of what you possess in Christ<sup>2</sup>.
- **Contemplative practices** like mindfulness—paying deliberate attention to the present moment—enables you to cultivate awareness of God’s presence in daily life and become attuned to the subtle movements of the Spirit<sup>3</sup>.
- **Gratitude**, understanding theologically that which acknowledges God’s abundant grace and deepens your relationship with Him while fostering inner joy even amid life’s challenges<sup>3</sup>.
- **Forgiveness**—both extending it to others and receiving it yourself—reflects God’s mercy and allows you to participate in His redemptive work, breaking cycles of hurt and fostering the inner freedom that characterizes union with him<sup>3</sup>.

The key is recognizing that union with Christ is a transformative journey toward likeness with God, not absorption into him. It’s about increasingly reflecting God’s image<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Chun Tse, *Assurance of Adoption: A New Paradigm for Assurance of Salvation* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Treat, *The Atonement: An Introduction*, ed. Graham A. Cole and Oren R. Martin, Short Studies in Systematic Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 147–148.

<sup>3</sup> Yohanes Bambang Mulyono, *Transformation in Theosis: Embracing the Divine Nature* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2025).

## Light for an identity obsessed culture

Union with Christ fundamentally reconfigures who we are. Rather than leaving us unchanged, this union creates “a new me, and a new way”—redefining our identity, restoring our sense of belonging, and reshaping how we live in the world<sup>1</sup>.



Our natural identity carries a critical problem: we were born “in Adam” rather than “in Christ,” inheriting both his sinful nature and God’s judgment against sin<sup>1</sup>. This leaves one separated from God, lacking true self-knowledge, and alienated from God’s family<sup>1</sup>. The solution isn’t self-improvement, rebranding, activism, Marxism, material gain and comfort—it’s a complete identity reboot established in a covenant keeping righteousness provided by God.

The fundamental barrier is one’s lack of the righteousness necessary for fellowship with a perfect and Holy Triune God and participation in His covenantal love and kingdom<sup>1</sup>. But this righteousness cannot be earned; it’s received through God’s grace by faith in Christ, who “was made sin” so that “in him we might become the righteousness of God<sup>1</sup>.” (2 Corinthians 5:21)

What changes through union with Christ is both our legal standing and our lived reality. Union with Christ is one of salvation’s most important consequences because it defines believers and gives them an identity in relation to Christ<sup>2</sup>. This isn’t a fleeting spiritual experience but an abiding reality that shapes one’s entire Christian life<sup>2</sup>. God joins us to Christ permanently; we are sealed with the Holy Spirit not temporarily but “for the day of redemption.”<sup>2</sup>

Importantly, this union maintains distinction—our identity isn’t threatened or diminished by becoming one with Christ; rather, we are united to him in intimacy and shared life<sup>3</sup>. By the work of the Holy Spirit, we are being conformed to His image, including conformity to His holiness and a share in both His rewards and His suffering<sup>3</sup>. Our new identity is secure, beloved, and eternally safe—yet it calls you to transformation. In a sense, “already/but not yet”.

One must wonder, in a culture filled with people desperate to find meaning in their life through some irrationally assumed identity, could the truth of one’s identity via union with Christ be the solution they so urgently seek.

<sup>1</sup> Kyle Worley, *Home with God: Our Union with Christ* (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 2025), 84–86.

<sup>2</sup> Robert A. Peterson, *Salvation Applied by the Spirit: Union with Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 414–415.

<sup>3</sup> Susanne Calhoun, *Union with Christ*, in *Lexham Survey of Theology*, ed. Mark Ward et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018).



## Insights and Application

Union with Christ transforms our spiritual life across several interconnected dimensions that move from intimate relationship with God to concrete daily obedience.

- 1) **Deepened communion with God** forms the foundation. Our union with Christ enables direct fellowship with God—Jesus promised that those who keep His commandments will be loved by the Father, who will come and make His abode with them<sup>1</sup>. This isn’t abstract theology; it’s an invitation to crave deeper knowledge of God’s love as a powerful motivator for obedience.
- 2) **Ongoing spiritual transformation** flows from this union. Union with Christ initiates and perpetuates spiritual transformation—by being united with him in His death and

resurrection, **you no longer live for yourself but for the One who died and rose for you**<sup>1</sup>. Like branches abiding in the vine, you bear fruit by consciously depending on Christ as the One apart from whom you can do nothing, using the means of Word and prayer, receiving the Father's discipline, and keeping His commandments, especially to love one another<sup>1</sup>.

- 3) **A transformed identity** reshapes how you see yourself. Union with Christ grants you **a new and noble identity**—great dignity as God's children, confidence in prayer because all in Christ is yours, and strength in temptation, knowing that as those in Christ you should have nothing to do with sin<sup>2</sup>.
- 4) **Strengthened community bonds** reorient your relationships. Union with Christ **connects you to other believers as members of one body**—you share one life with other believers and should depend on one another and value the weakest in the church<sup>2</sup>.
- 5) **Resilience through suffering** provides hope. Union with Christ grants **hope in trials and temptations**—death dissolves earthly unions, but not the union between Christ and your soul, so you can say in all troubles, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?”<sup>2,3</sup>
- 6) **Empowers bold faithfulness in ministry**. Union with Christ **empowers pastors with bold faithfulness in ministry**, as Paul says, “For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ.” Gospel preachers speak the Word in union with Christ.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology: Spirit and Salvation*, Reformed Systematic Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 3:262–263.

<sup>2</sup> Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Essentials of Reformed Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2025), 501–502.

<sup>3</sup> Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Essentials of Reformed Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2025), 502.

## Study Conclusion

Union with Christ is a foundational and multifaceted concept in Christian theology, often considered the central truth from which all other salvific benefits flow. It describes the intimate, spiritual, and vital relationship between believers and Jesus Christ. The doctrine entails:

- 1) **Centrality:** Many theologians consider union with Christ to be the “great fact” or the “central truth” of the Christian faith, grounding all aspects of salvation, including justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification. It's not merely a doctrine among others, but the overarching reality that makes all other doctrines meaningful for the believer.
- 2) **Nature of the Union:**
  - a. **Spiritual:** It's a spiritual reality brought about by the Holy Spirit, where believers are united to Christ in a way that transcends mere intellectual assent or moral imitation.
  - b. **Legal/Forensic:** Through this union, Christ's righteousness is imputed to believers, and their sins are imputed to Christ, forming the basis for justification.
  - c. **Vital/Organic:** It's a living, dynamic relationship, often compared to a vine and its branches where believers draw life, strength, and fruitfulness from Christ.
  - d. **Personal:** It's a union with the living, resurrected person of Jesus Christ, not just with His teachings or His work.



- 3) **Means of Union:** While the Holy Spirit is the agent who effects this union, faith is the instrument through which believers consciously apprehend and appropriate it.
- 4) **Effects of Union:** All the benefits of salvation are received “in Christ” or “through union with Christ.” This includes regeneration (new birth), justification (being declared righteous), adoption (becoming children of God), sanctification (growth in holiness), and ultimately glorification.

In essence, to be “in Christ” means that a believer’s identity, standing before God, and spiritual life are inextricably bound up with Christ’s person and work.

## Application

The doctrine of union with Christ reshapes how believers approach the Christian life by fundamentally reorienting them away from self-reliance toward dependence on Christ’s resources and presence.



### A. Shifting from Rule-Keeping to Relational Living

The doctrine is profoundly practical because it underlines that the Christian life is not just about living for Christ but also about living in Christ<sup>1</sup>. Many believers initially receive Christianity as a set of external expectations—Bible reading, prayer, church attendance, behavioral rules. The problem with this approach is constant dependence on one’s own resources, leading to the cycle of “I must do more,” when the real path to spiritual development is focusing on what Christ has done and one’s relationship with him<sup>1</sup>. Paul never pointed troubled churches to their own resources but always directed them to Christ and their identity in him<sup>1</sup>.

### B. Foundation for Transformation and Fruitfulness

Union with Christ initiates and perpetuates spiritual transformation, reorienting believers’ basic life orientation so they no longer live for themselves but for Christ<sup>2</sup>. Christians bear fruit by abiding in Christ as branches of a vine, with fruit revealing the fact of union rather than procuring it<sup>2</sup>. Believers produce fruit by consciously depending on Christ as the One apart from whom they can do nothing, using the Word and prayer, receiving the Father’s discipline, and keeping Christ’s commandments<sup>2</sup>.

### C. Guarding Against Spiritual Extremes

The doctrine of union with Christ minimizes the dangers of both antinomianism (living however one wants because of justification) and legalism (reducing salvation to law-fulfillment rather than relationship with God)<sup>3</sup>. Emphasizing union with Christ focuses lives on Jesus’s centrality, since all salvation benefits—past, present, and future—are obtained through union with him<sup>3</sup>.

### D. Foundation for Communion with God

Union with Christ establishes the basis for intimate fellowship with God. Jesus promised that through the Holy Spirit, he would share His life with believers and dwell within them, and that those who keep his commandments will be loved by the Father, who will manifest Himself to them and make His abode with them<sup>4</sup>. This reality should motivate believers to crave deeper knowledge of God’s love and more intimate fellowship with him in Christ<sup>4</sup>.

### E. Participation in Christ’s Sufferings

Union with Christ involves participation in His sufferings. Paul aspired to be found in Christ and to know both the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death<sup>4</sup>. This transforms how believers understand trials and hardship—not as meaningless suffering but as participation in Christ’s redemptive work.

### F. Defending Justification Against Misunderstanding

The doctrine of union with Christ helps maintain correct teaching about justification by providing a biblical response to accusations that Protestant justification by faith is mere legal



fiction. The answer is that “in Christ Jesus,” believers also receive the righteousness of God<sup>5</sup>. The forensic declaration of righteousness and the transformative benefits of salvation are inseparable because both are communicated through union with Christ by the Holy Spirit’s power<sup>4</sup>.

### **G. Understanding Election and Predestination**

Even doctrines like election and predestination become better understood and more intimate through the biblical emphasis on union with Christ<sup>5</sup>.

### **H. Giving Others Truth to Apprehend**

Faith grows through truth, and when the full dimensions of God’s grace in Christ are not clearly taught, faith has nothing substantial to grasp<sup>6</sup>. When you teach others about union with Christ, you’re not merely conveying abstract doctrine—you’re providing the intellectual and spiritual resources they need to trust Christ more deeply. Sound doctrine gives people a clear vision of Jesus, enabling them to know him more fully, trust him more boldly, and enjoy him more deeply<sup>6</sup>. A sound understanding of union with Christ equips you to help others by providing them with the theological foundation they need to experience genuine spiritual transformation and deeper trust in Jesus.

### **I. Preventing Spiritual Distortion**

Spiritual vitality flows from union with Christ rather than mere imitation of him, and when the full scope of God’s gracious provision in Christ is not clearly articulated, the church’s spiritual life suffers distortion and attenuation, with no guarantee that believers will experience fullness of life<sup>6</sup>. By teaching union with Christ clearly, you protect others from incomplete or distorted understandings that limit their spiritual growth.

### **J. Pastoring Those in Crisis**

The doctrine of union with Christ has profound relevance for life, particularly when pastoring people flattened by tragedy<sup>7</sup>. When believers understand they are united to Christ spiritually—that Christ dwells in them through the Holy Spirit—they possess a resource for endurance and hope that transcends their circumstances.

### **K. Emphasizing Grace Over Performance**

Union with Christ is God’s gracious work, not something earned or deserved; Christ himself, along with His blessings, righteousness, and identity, is given to us undeserved and unmerited<sup>7</sup>. Teaching this liberates others from the exhausting cycle of self-reliance and performance-based spirituality.

<sup>1</sup> A.T.B. McGowan, Cdhp: *Person and Work of Christ* (Crownhill, Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology: Spirit and Salvation, Reformed Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 3:262–263.

<sup>3</sup> Larry Pettegrew, *Forsaking Israel: How It Happened and Why It Matters* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress, 2020), 204.

<sup>4</sup> Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology: Spirit and Salvation, Reformed Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 3:262–263.

<sup>5</sup> Larry Pettegrew, *Forsaking Israel: How It Happened and Why It Matters* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress, 2020), 204–205.

<sup>6</sup> Robert H. Thune, *Gospel Eldership: Equipping a New Generation of Servant Leaders* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2016), iii.

<sup>7</sup> Chris Brauns, *Bound Together: How We Are Tied to Others in Good and Bad Choices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013).

## Questions



- 1) In the study there is a statement that “sin may temporarily create apparent separation of union between Christ and the believer, but it cannot affect final separation”.
  - a. How could this separation be apparent but not an actual union separation?
  - b. What if I sin and sense no apparent union separation, does that mean it wasn’t really a sin?

### Answer:

**Apparent vs Actual:** The apparent separation that sin creates operates primarily as an “emotional and relational experience” rather than an actual ontological (fundamental structure of reality) break between the believer and Christ.

When sin occurs, believers often feel a palpable distance from God, even though sin cannot actually sever them from God’s love<sup>1</sup>. This felt distance manifests in several concrete ways:

- A. Sin produces guilt, shame, frustration, and hopelessness—emotions that stem from the realization of having disappointed God<sup>1</sup>. Critically, this sense of failure can cause believers to emotionally distance themselves from God precisely when they most need to draw near to him<sup>1</sup>.
- B. The apparent separation also involves a crisis of identity and belonging. Because believers perceive themselves as separated from God due to sin, they live in a perceived condition of separation, experiencing a sensation of lostness<sup>2</sup>. This disconnection from understanding who they are in relation to God creates a spiritual hurt deep within the individual<sup>2</sup>.

What makes this separation “apparent” rather than real is that it is existential (only an apparent threat to the union’s existence) in nature rather than ontological<sup>2</sup>. The believer’s actual position in Christ remains unchanged—Scripture reminds us that our location is based not on experience but on Jesus’s own location and belonging (fundamental structure of reality)<sup>2</sup> - John 12:26, John 14:3, John 14:20, John 17:21–24, Col 3:3, Eph 2:6, Phil 3:20.

Yet the emotional and psychological weight of guilt can be genuinely disorienting. Even after seeking God’s forgiveness, believers may carry a nagging sense of guilt for days<sup>1</sup>, creating a subjective experience of distance that contradicts the objective reality of union with Christ.

The key insight is that this apparent separation is fundamentally a “lie believers believe about themselves”—a distortion of reality that sin leverages to create emotional isolation, even though the believer’s standing in Christ remains secure and unbroken.

**Sin without conviction:** A critical distinction emerges, namely that sin and conviction are not identical. Guilt is a judicial term relating to law—we have all sinned and broken the moral law of God, and therefore we are all guilty<sup>3</sup>, regardless of whether we feel convicted about it. An action can violate God’s moral law even when the believer’s conscience remains silent.

The absence of conviction often reflects a deficiency in the believer’s conscience rather than the absence of sin. Our conscience is a function of our mind, and it will always be true to itself, but not necessarily to God. Before we came to Christ, our conscience was formed as we assimilated values from our home, school and social environments. Observing role

models and learning right from wrong from others has shaped our conscience.<sup>3</sup> A conscience shaped by cultural conditioning or spiritual immaturity may fail to register what God's Word clearly identifies as sin.

However, there's an important caveat: believers who transgress their own convictions have sinned, even if their actions are not objectively sinful. It is a sin to violate one's conscience, even when it is "weak."<sup>4</sup> This means if you act against your conscience—even if that conscience is mistaken—you sin by violating it.

The practical implication is that believers should not rely on the absence of conviction as proof that an action is righteous. Instead, they should test their actions against Scripture itself. If Scripture does not condemn a certain action and you have not been personally convicted that it is wrong, don't condemn yourself if you continue to do it. However, if you are still uncertain about doing a particular thing don't do it, because to do so would be sin.<sup>5</sup> When in doubt, the safer path is restraint rather than presumption.

<sup>1</sup> Matt Carter, *The Long Walk Home: Discovering the Fullness of Life in the Love of the Father* (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 2019), 129–130.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Nelson, *Love in the Key of Three: The Trinitarian Theology of Wm. Paul Young* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Neil T. Anderson, *The Daily Discipler* (Ventura, CA: Regal; Gospel Light, 2005), 146.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Mangum, ed., *Lexham Context Commentary: New Testament*, Lexham Context Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> John A. Stewart, *Romans 9–16: The Greatest News*, ed. Roque Albuquerque (Minneapolis, MN: Lamplighters International, 2017), 76.

## **2) In the study the statement that “a common observation is that after union with Christ scripture started making sense”. However, such a radical cognitive override caused by union with Christ is not biblical.**

Many unbelievers understand the basic propositions of Scripture intellectually without regeneration (e.g., historians, atheists, or scholars of religion can accurately paraphrase the gospel message). What they lack, according to biblical texts like 1 Corinthians 2:14, is spiritual reception and acceptance—not raw comprehension. Conversely, many genuine believers report periods of confusion or dryness in understanding Scripture long after conversion. If union with Christ fundamentally rewired the mind to make Scripture inherently intelligible, such ongoing struggles would be anomalous. Wouldn't the "sudden making sense" phenomenon be better explained as a shift in willingness, illumination by the Spirit in moments of reading, or cumulative learning rather than an ontological overhaul of cognitive faculties.

**Answer:** This question highlights a genuine theological tension: how does an ontological union with Christ produce epistemological transformation such that suddenly Scripture is understood differently?

Union with Christ is a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit rather than a human achievement<sup>1</sup>, which means the cognitive shift isn't merely psychological self-improvement or intellectual effort. Spiritual life and fruitfulness are imparted experientially to believers through this union<sup>1</sup>, suggesting that the Spirit's work encompasses not just relational standing but also transformed perception which informs understanding.

This is framed through the concept of *vital union*—a living relationship where the human soul retains its individuality while being graciously energized by the Spirit<sup>1</sup>. This distinction matters: the believer doesn't become passively absorbed into Christ but rather experiences active spiritual energization that reshapes how they interpret reality.

Fixing one's mind on union with Christ profoundly impacts how one lives, providing boldness and confidence, and believers experience the benefits of their completeness in Him as they learn to take advantage of what they possess in Christ<sup>2</sup>. This suggests the cognitive rupture isn't arbitrary but flows from recognizing a reality already established—the believer's union with Christ provides a new hermeneutical lens through which Scripture becomes intelligible.

The mechanism appears to involve the Spirit's simultaneous work on multiple levels: establishing union, imparting spiritual vitality, and illuminating understanding. Rather than a radical rupture disconnected from the union itself, the cognitive transformation emerges *from* the vital, experiential reality of being united to Christ. This union is with a personal, risen, living, omnipresent Lord<sup>3</sup>—not with abstract doctrine—which means the Spirit's work of uniting believers to Christ simultaneously opens perception to Scripture's meaning in ways that doctrine alone cannot.

<sup>1</sup> Bruce A. Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997), 323.

<sup>2</sup> Joel R. Beeke and Michael P. V. Barrett, *A Radical, Comprehensive Call to Holiness* (Christian Focus, 2021), 34.

<sup>3</sup> Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907), 795.

### 3) **Knowledge of the Doctrine of the Union with Christ is interesting but what value comes from knowing this?**

**Question 3A:** Given that the doctrine of the union with Christ is a highly abstract (theoretical) metaphysical (outside the physical world) concept that lacks clear, concrete implications, **why consider this doctrine** given that ideas like “participation in Christ” or “mystical union” do not provide specific guidance for decision-making, ethical dilemmas, or everyday habits in the way moral rules or practical wisdom do.

**Answer:** All foundational realities are abstract (theoretical) at one level (e.g., human dignity, freedom, justice), yet they decisively shape practice. Union with Christ provides the ontological (existence in reality) basis for Christian ethics: believers act *from* a new identity, not merely *toward* moral ideals.

Without this grounding, obedience risks becoming legalism or mere imitation. Union with Christ reframes daily action as participation rather than performance, which deeply affects motivation, perseverance, and humility. Participation (because of union realization) decouples action from any claim to merit for one's decision-making, or rule keeping which we might otherwise call religion.

**Question 3B:** Whatever practical outcomes union with Christ is supposed to produce (e.g., moral transformation, assurance, motivation for holiness) are already covered by other doctrines such as justification by faith,

sanctification and imitation of Christ. Though theologically interesting, **isn't study of this doctrine redundant thus unnecessary.**

**Answer:** Union with Christ is not redundant; it is structurally prior. Justification, sanctification, adoption, and glorification all occur in Christ. Rather than duplicating other doctrines, union explains how their benefits are applied to the believer. Removing union with Christ turns salvation into a set of disconnected transactions instead of a coherent, personal reality.

**Question 3C:** Critics may argue that understanding or affirming this doctrine intellectually does not reliably lead to different behavior. A person can fully assent to the doctrine while remaining ethically unchanged, suggesting that the doctrine itself lacks causal practical force. **Why concern us with it?**

**Answer:** No doctrine guarantees transformation if it remains merely intellectual. This objection applies equally to teachings on grace, love, or sin. The failure lies not in the doctrine but in disengaged appropriation. In fact, union with Christ directly addresses this problem by grounding obedience in identity rather than willpower, making transformation more sustainable and less performative.

**Question 3D:** Union with Christ refers to a spiritual reality that many believers do not consciously experience. If its presence or absence cannot be clearly identified in one's life, then **how is knowledge of it functionally irrelevant** to how one lives or feels.

**Answer:** Christian theology does not limit reality to conscious experience. Many decisive realities—justification, adoption, regeneration—are often not felt but are nonetheless transformative. Union with Christ offers interpretive clarity for lived experience: assurance in doubt, stability in suffering, and hope amid failure, even when subjective feelings fluctuate.

**Question 3D:** Emphasizing union with Christ might lead some believers to conclude that: growth happens automatically, or personal effort is unnecessary. From this perspective, **the doctrine could undercut responsibility, discipline, or intentional moral action so why highlight it?**

**Answer:** Properly understood, union with Christ grounds active obedience rather than undermining it. Participation in Christ empowers effort without making effort the basis of worth. Biblically, union and effort are held together: believers “work out” what God is “working in.” Passivity arises from misunderstanding union, not from the doctrine itself.

**Question 3E:** This doctrine is difficult to explain clearly, especially to new believers or in pastoral settings. If it requires extensive theological background to grasp, it may not be a helpful tool for teaching, counseling, or evangelism. **Because it's a difficult concept why teach it?**

**Answer:** Pastoral difficulty does not equal pastoral uselessness. Many essential doctrines (Trinity, incarnation) require careful explanation yet are indispensable. Union with Christ is pastorally powerful precisely because it addresses core human needs:



belonging, identity, assurance, and meaning. It reframes suffering, failure, and obedience in deeply personal terms.

**Question 3E:** Union with Christ refers to a reality that cannot be empirically tested or observed. As a result, it cannot be shown to produce measurable practical outcomes distinct from psychological or social factors. **Because it cannot be quantified why teach this doctrine?**

**Answer:** Christian theology is not reducible to empirical measurement. However, union with Christ yields observable patterns: perseverance in suffering, humility in success, repentance without despair, and obedience motivated by love rather than fear. The doctrine explains why such fruit appears, even if it cannot be isolated in laboratory conditions.

**Question 3F:** Critics might say that time spent teaching or debating union with Christ could be better spent on more immediately actionable topics (e.g., ethics, justice, spiritual disciplines). Even if the doctrine is true, **is it the most efficient use of attention for practical use.**

**Answer:** This assumes that union with Christ is a peripheral doctrine, when in fact it is integrative. Teaching ethics, spiritual disciplines, or justice without union with Christ risks moralism or burnout. Union with Christ does not compete with practical formation; it animates and unifies it.



## Study Objections

- I. The analogy of vine and branch does not support the claim of any sort of cognitive transformation.**

The text invokes John 15 (vine and branches) to describe life flowing into the believer, renewing the "inner nature." However, the biblical context limits the analogy: In John 15, Jesus uses the vine imagery to speak of fruit-bearing (love, obedience, joy—external evidence of discipleship), not internal cognitive restructuring.

The "life" that flows is spiritual vitality for obedience, not a mystical reconfiguration of thought processes or affections. Paul's parallel language in Romans 11 (grafting into the olive tree) emphasizes inclusion in covenant privileges, not psychological renewal. Applying the analogy to mental functioning imports ideas foreign to the text, resembling more mystical or quasi-pantheistic interpretations than the original intent.

### Response to objection:

The objection oversimplifies what John 15 actually claims. While fruit-bearing is certainly central to the passage, the vine-branch imagery operates on multiple levels simultaneously—not just external behavior, but internal transformation and the very mechanism by which believers function.

The longer abiding in Christ deepens, the more His influence pervades one's life so that believers begin to reflect His nature and character<sup>1</sup>. This isn't merely external conformity; it describes a pervasive influence reshaping how a person operates from within. The vine produces the sap that enables the branch to produce fruit, and believers cannot manufacture the character traits the Spirit must supernaturally

produce inside them<sup>1</sup>. The mechanism itself—how thoughts, desires, and impulses are generated—is what changes.

Critically, abiding involves allowing Christ's Word to impact one's life at its deepest level<sup>2</sup>, not merely surface behavior. When abiding, believers become conscious that everything Christ commands of them, Christ must also produce in them<sup>2</sup>. This describes precisely the kind of cognitive and affective restructuring the objector claims is absent from the text.

Moreover, the abiding language denotes continuing loyalty and obedience, but it is not exhausted by this—there is an ontological dimension to it as well, and when Christ abides in believers, the abiding language definitely has ontological significance<sup>3</sup>. The passage addresses not just what believers do, but who they become and how they function at a fundamental level.

The objection artificially separates internal transformation from external fruit-bearing, but John presents them as inseparable: fruit flows from transformed processing, not from external effort alone.

<sup>1</sup> James Merritt, *9 Keys to Successful Leadership: How to Impact and Influence Others* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> John Koessler, *True Discipleship: The Art of Following Jesus* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2003), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Gary W. Derickson, *First, Second, and Third John*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012), 730.

## **II. The study asserts personal identity and agency are preserved, describing two spirits coexisting without extinguishing one another but this is self-contradictory.**

This introduces philosophical tension: If thoughts, affections, opinions, and impulses now "pass through a theological framework erected by the Holy Spirit" before manifesting, this implies a profound alteration of the processing mechanism itself.

Even if not coercive, such a description suggests the pre-conversion mind operated without any divine influence or grace, while the post-conversion mind is continuously shaped from within by another person (the Holy Spirit). This raises questions about continuity of personhood: Is the "old self" truly dead (Romans 6) or merely augmented?

Also doesn't emphasizing such radical dependence can lead to passivity ("I can't think rightly apart from direct mystical inflow") or spiritual pride ("My thoughts are now Christ-filtered, unlike yours"). Scripture instead calls believers to active renewal through deliberate engagement with truth (Romans 12:2; Colossians 3:10)—suggesting transformation occurs primarily through ordinary means (Scripture, prayer, community) rather than an invisible, automatic spiritual dimension.

### **Response to objection:**

The objection identifies a real philosophical problem, but academic treatment on this topic suggests the tension is less about identity dissolution and more about how divine and human agency coexist without one canceling the other.

Sanctification requires the interface of divine and human agency<sup>1</sup>—neither operates in isolation. The key counter rebuttal is that altering how thoughts are *processed* doesn't necessarily alter *who you are*. Consider an analogy: learning a new language rewires your brain's processing mechanisms, yet you remain yourself. Similarly, the Holy Spirit's work doesn't erase your cognitive architecture; it redirects it toward different ends.

The Apostle Paul juxtaposes the command to work out one's own salvation with the declaration that God provides the spiritual strength necessary, deliberately and carefully preserving a fine balance between these two truths<sup>2</sup>. This balance is the crucial point: the real "secret" of holiness consists in learning to keep that balance—relying thoroughly on God as the true agent in sanctification while faithfully discharging one's personal responsibility<sup>2</sup>.

### Objection's presuppositional errors:

- 1) The objection to the study text assumes that if the Holy Spirit filters thoughts through a theological framework, personal agency must be compromised. But Christian theology requires understanding the Creator's relationship with creation in a way that accommodates belief in divine action within history without denying the reality of the gift of a due degree of freedom for creatures to behave in accordance with their natures<sup>3</sup>. One's agency (free will) isn't negated by divine influence—it's enabled by it.
- 2) Furthermore, man, made in the image of God, is likewise free, and must share in the divine freedom if he is to be in a true sense a child of God, a co-worker with Him, and a partaker of the divine nature<sup>4</sup>. The theological claim is that you become *more* yourself, not less, as the Spirit aligns your processing with truth. The transformation preserves identity while redirecting its operation.

<sup>1</sup> Molly T. Marshall, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw and William C. Placher, *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2022), 82.

<sup>2</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Sanctification*, in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 2:1900–1901.

<sup>3</sup> John Polkinghorne, *Science and Religion in Quest of Truth* (London: SPCK, 2011), 84.

<sup>4</sup> William Hallock Johnson, *The Free-Will Problem in Modern Thought*, Columbia University Contributions to Philosophy, Psychology and Education (New York; Berlin: The Macmillan Co.; Mayer and Müller, 1903), 10:2:84–85.

### III. The study text suggests that transformation (renewing of the mind) is a standard and immediate feature of union with Christ. How is this possible given psychological and experiential variability among believers?

Believers exhibit wide variation in mental clarity, emotional stability, and spiritual perception post-conversion. Some struggle lifelong with doubt, depression, or besetting sins without evident "newness of mind"; others report gradual growth through study and discipline rather than sudden inward renewal. If union with Christ fundamentally and uniformly transformed mental functioning, we would expect far greater consistency.

Wouldn't observable changes be better attributed to common grace, learning, maturation, community influence, and periodic illumination by the Spirit—rather than a hidden ontological mechanism accessible only in the afterlife.

The study text also asserts that the full dimension of renewal "we cannot see now" will only be fully understood in eternity. This appeal to future understanding seems to be functioning as an immunizing stratagem. There is an epistemological issue here: Claiming a mechanism operates in an unverifiable spiritual realm shields the assertion from present scrutiny. While Christians affirm unseen realities, extraordinary claims about ongoing mental transformation require correspondingly clear biblical warrant or observable effects. Here, the primary evidence offered is subjective experience ("a common observation"), which is notoriously variable and culturally shaped. How is this appeal to future understanding a legitimate assertion?

### **Response to objection:**

**A foundation process – not a universal switch:** To clarify; the study text does not assert that union with Christ produces uniform mental transformation across all believers—rather, it establishes a “foundation” for transformation that unfolds through a complex interplay of divine action and human participation over a lifetime.

Sanctification involves both the Holy Spirit’s empowering work and human free will, though the latter remains fallen<sup>1</sup>. This is crucial: union with Christ doesn’t override the biological, psychological, and neurological realities that shape how we think and feel. Changes in structural capacities and habits occur for Christians within the same biological structures as they do for others<sup>2</sup>, meaning believers aren’t exempt from the ordinary constraints of human development.

Variations in mental clarity, emotional stability, and spiritual perception post-conversion involves several factors. Negative choices wire our brains for particular neurochemical responses, so that walking by the Spirit rather than by the flesh requires continuing, deliberate rethinking and retuning, with many determined decisions to believe God’s truth about our identity, until our brain is rewired enough that the new way becomes the more prevalent way<sup>2</sup>. Even then, old memories and patterns may resurface, especially under stress<sup>2</sup>.

Critically, transformation is a continuing, lifelong process and not a completed stage until glorification<sup>1</sup>. Believers with depression, doubt, or besetting sins aren’t experiencing union with Christ less fully—they’re experiencing it “differently”, filtered through biological and psychological conditions that union doesn’t automatically override. The church needs more psychologically sophisticated study of how biological, cognitive, personality, and psychosocial development interact with sanctification processes<sup>3</sup>, particularly regarding depression, doubt, and other persistent struggles.

### **Objection’s presuppositional errors:**

The **expected consistency** in the rebuttal assumes union works like a switch which the study text never stated; theology suggests “renewing of the mind” works more like a seed—present and real, but requiring time, effort, and conditions beyond the believer’s control to flourish.

The inconsistency rebuttal to the study text argument fails because:

- A. the study text never claimed union with Christ acts like an immediate universal switch and scripture affirms the results of this in union is manifested over time
- B. Scripture affirms it’s a process; 2 Cor 3:18, Col 3:9–10, 2 Pet 3:18, Phil 2:12–13, Phil 1:6, Heb 10:14, 1 John 3:2–3.
- C. Variability is expected, not unexpected: Union with Christ facilitates progressive sanctification which is ongoing process in which the Christian becomes more and more separated from sin itself, involving a continuing transformation of our inward character and mental attitudes, as well as our outward behavior and conduct<sup>1</sup>. Each believer will be on their own journey and God intends that the process of sanctification continue throughout the believer’s life, and this present process of sanctification never ends in this life<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Jack Cottrell, *What the Bible Says about the Holy Spirit: Power from on High, What the Bible Says Series* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 2007), 346.

<sup>2</sup> Glen Spencer Jr., *Jude: Contending With The Pretenders*, Expository Pulpit Series (WORDsearch, 1994), 8.

Regarding any appeal in the study text to a future (eternal dimension) understanding is nothing more than an **immunizing stratagem** thus a legitimate epistemological problem. Utilizing a presuppositional empirical rationalism filter, this rebuttal to the study text hinges on distinguishing between unverifiable spiritual claims and

observable behavioral transformation and presupposes the study text is asserting the Union with Christ has no observable manifestations.

The immunizing stratagem charge fails because:

- A. The study text never said Union with Christ has no observable manifestations
- B. Christianity makes falsifiable claims: if believers show no growth in character, virtue, or relational health over decades, the doctrine faces serious credibility problems. The appeal to future completion doesn't shield present transformation from scrutiny—it simply acknowledges that perfection awaits eternity while insisting that measurable progress should be evident now.
- C. Christianity doesn't ask believers to accept union with Christ thus sanctification as an invisible, undetectable process—it insists on concrete, measurable evidence.
  - 1) There is no argument against a changed life<sup>3</sup>. This isn't mysticism; it's empirical observation.
  - 2) Believers can assess whether, over time, they experience greater victory over temptations and overt sins, more love for God, more joy in Scripture, more power in prayer, greater concern for the lost, deeper fellowship in the church, and heightened awareness of Christ's presence<sup>3</sup>. This empirically observable.
  - 3) Union with Christ thus sanctification is fundamentally an internal work evidenced externally through personal Christlike character and good works to the benefit of others<sup>4</sup>. The internal transformation produces external fruit that others can witness. This empirically observable.
  - 4) While believers cannot control every thought entering their minds, they possess resources to "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" through divine power available to them<sup>5</sup>. This describes a cognitive capacity that can be tested and observed.
  - 5) Manifestations of changes in a believer don't appear immediately at conversion; rather, they develop progressively as life becomes more disciplined, concern for others increases, and love for God becomes more real<sup>4</sup>. The gradual nature actually strengthens the claim—sanctification isn't claimed as instantaneous magic but as a verifiable developmental process.

<sup>1</sup> Stefana Dan Laing, *Spiritual Formation and Discipleship*, in A Handbook of Theology, ed. Daniel L. Akin, David S. Dockery, and Nathan A. Finn, *Theology for the People of God* (Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2023), 478–479.

<sup>2</sup> Don J. Payne, *Already Sanctified: A Theology of the Christian Life in Light of God's Completed Work* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2020), 149–150.

<sup>3</sup> E. L. Johnson, *Sanctification*, in Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology & Counseling, ed. David G. Benner and Peter C. Hill (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 1051.

<sup>4</sup> L. Nelson Bell, "A Layman and His Faith," *Christianity Today* (Washington, D.C.: Christianity Today, 1965), 10:4:209–210.

<sup>5</sup> Simon Ponsonby, *The Pursuit of the Holy: A Divine Invitation* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology: Spirit-Given Life: God's People, Present and Future*, Integrative Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 3:208.



**IV. The claim that the of union with Christ produces a fundamental, ongoing reconfiguration of the believer's mental and spiritual functioning through an invisible vital connection goes beyond what Scripture explicitly teaches.**

Biblical transformation language (e.g., renewal of mind in Romans 12:2, putting on the new self in Ephesians 4:22–24) is consistently framed in imperative, not indicative, terms—something believers are commanded to pursue through engagement with truth, not something automatically imparted by mystical inflow. While the Holy Spirit certainly indwells and empowers believers, the idea that this indwelling routinely bypasses ordinary cognitive processes to erect an internal "theological framework" lacks strong exegetical support and faces significant challenges from Scripture, reason, and experience. A more biblically grounded view sees mental and spiritual renewal as gradual, mediated primarily through Word and sacrament, and fully realized only at glorification.

**Response to objection:**

The objector's position contains important truths but misses how Paul integrates indicative and imperative without subordinating one to the other. This isn't a choice between spiritual inflow and imperative obedience—it's a unified theological framework where both operate simultaneously.

**Objection's presuppositional errors:**

The critical error is conflating indicatives with imperatives. Indicatives present a state of affairs whereas imperatives give commands, and Paul's fruit of the Spirit passage cannot be treated as a new law divorced from the indicatives, he has already established<sup>1</sup> Union with Christ is the indicative, and on the basis of this indicative, Paul gives imperatives such as loving one's neighbor<sup>1</sup>.

The objector assumes imperatives are primary—that believers must pursue transformation through engagement with truth. But we cannot reverse the order by making imperatives the means by which we obtain the indicatives; rather, our union with Christ enables us to obey the moral imperatives of Scripture<sup>1</sup>. The Spirit produces His holy fruit within us, and we cannot pull ourselves up by our moral bootstraps in the effort to love or produce peace<sup>1</sup>.

Critically, Paul deliberately and explicitly connects indicative and imperative in the very same sentence, and they belong together without contradiction in a positive, nonpolar relationship<sup>2</sup>. The same Spirit that attests justification as an accomplished fact also effects the fruit of righteousness in the believer, uniting and showing the relationship between indicative and imperative<sup>3</sup>.

The objector's concern about "mystical inflow" bypassing ordinary processes is also addressed: Sanctification by the Spirit is not to be confused with psychological seizure or suspension of the believer's mental and volitional faculties<sup>4</sup>. The Spirit touches and transforms our deepest desires toward God, and what we desire changes us<sup>5</sup>. This describes transformation through the reorientation of desire, not the elimination of human agency.

<sup>1</sup> J. V. Fesko, *Galatians*, ed. Jon D. Payne, The Lectio Continua Expository Commentary on the New Testament (Powder Springs, GA: Tolle Lege Press, 2012), 173–174.

<sup>2</sup> Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *In the Fullness of Time: An Introduction to the Biblical Theology of Acts and Paul* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 374.

<sup>3</sup> James Nkansah-Obrempong, *Foundations for African Theological Ethics* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Monographs, 2013), 108.

<sup>4</sup> Sam Storms, *Packer on the Christian Life: Knowing God in Christ, Walking by the Spirit*, ed. Stephen J. Nichols and Justin Taylor, *Theologians on the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 133.

<sup>5</sup> Don J. Payne, *Already Sanctified: A Theology of the Christian Life in Light of God's Completed Work* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2020), 132.

## V. That regeneration and union with Christ are inseparable is questionable.

The study text asserts that regeneration (being "born again") and union with Christ are inseparably linked aspects of the same salvific event, but not identical. That union is the broader, foundational reality that grounds and causes regeneration, while regeneration is an effect within that union. That they occur simultaneously through mutual dependence, with union effected by the Spirit and only consciously appropriated later through faith.

This view, often associated with certain Reformed theologians (e.g., influences from John Murray or similar systematic theologies), attempts to elevate union with Christ as the central organizing principle of salvation. However, this construction can be challenged on exegetical, logical, theological, and practical grounds. Below is a structured argument demonstrating that regeneration is better understood as logically prior to union with Christ, making them distinguishable in sequence rather than merely in dimension, and avoiding unnecessary complications.

- A. Exegetical priority of regeneration in key biblical texts. The text claims no sequence, only mutual dependence, with regeneration as an "effect" of union. In John 3 Jesus describes being "born again" (or "born from above") as the prerequisite for seeing or entering the kingdom of God (John 3:3–5). This rebirth by the Spirit is presented as the initiating act that enables spiritual life and perception. Union with Christ language (e.g., abiding in him) appears elsewhere (John 15), but here regeneration is the gateway—no prior union is mentioned as its cause.
- B. Ezekiel 36:25–27 and the New Covenant Promise: God promises to sprinkle clean water, give a new heart, and put His Spirit within—explicitly regeneration language. This inward renewal precedes and enables walking in God's statutes. Paul echoes this in Titus 3:5 ("washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit") as the basis for salvation, without referencing union as the prior ground.
- C. 1 John and Evidential Language: Texts like 1 John 5:1 ("Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God") use the perfect tense for regeneration ("has been born"), indicating it as a completed act logically prior to ongoing faith and love. Belief flows from the new birth, not vice versa, and union is the result of believing (cf. Ephesians 1:13: believed, then sealed).

**If regeneration were merely an "effect" within an already-existing union, these texts would need to presuppose an unconscious union preceding the Spirit's regenerating work—yet no such prior union is stated.**

### **Response to objection:**

This objection's challenge is predicated on conflation of logical priority with causal priority, but union with Christ and regeneration operate on different logical planes simultaneously without one reducing to the other.

**Analogy:** Photons – particles exhibiting wave like behavior have no mass (just energy) generated as a byproduct of nuclear fusion reactions in the Sun<sup>1</sup>. They carry three wavelengths of the energy spectrum (visible, infrared and ultraviolet)<sup>2,3,4</sup>. If I place a glass of water in the sun light all three wavelength types arrive at the same time. The retina in our eyes transmits biochemical signals to our brains that we interpret as illuminated water (visible). Over a period, the infrared wavelength excites H<sub>2</sub>O molecules whose vibrations increased the water temperature which we can feel with our skin receptors. The UV light has the effect of killing bacteria by denaturing its DNA<sup>5,6,7,8</sup>. We taste

the difference between unpolluted water and that which is not<sup>9,10,11,12</sup>. All the benefits of these wavelengths exist in relation to the Photon. Logically we can say they arrive at the same time but from a cause perspective they operate differently but the fundamental unit of this reality is the photon.

The critical exegetical point is that regeneration must never be considered apart from Christ; positively stated, regeneration must always be understood in relation to union with Christ<sup>13</sup>. This isn't elevating union with Christ arbitrarily—it reflects the structure of New Testament soteriology itself. All of salvation's blessings are located "in Christ," and this vital relationship summarizes our salvation and describes the new life that God has given us to live<sup>14</sup>.

The logical relationship is clarified through Owen's formulation: regeneration "is such an effect as immediately and inseparably accompanieth" union with Christ, "so that where the one is not, there is not the other. The act whereby he unites us unto himself is the same with that whereby he cleanseth our natures"<sup>15</sup>. Regeneration is not prior to union; rather, union with Christ logically precedes both regeneration and justification by faith, while yet, chronologically, the moment we are united with Christ is also the moment of our regeneration and justification<sup>3</sup>.

On theological grounds, the objection fails because given the consistent priority that the Bible places on being "in Christ," the doctrine of union with Christ properly occupies a primary place in systematic theology and provides the essential context for Christian experience, through which we are joined to Christ at every point in His saving activity<sup>2</sup>. Union with Christ is "really the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation," embracing salvation from its ultimate source in eternal election to its final fruition in glorification, the central dogmatic principle that unites the several doctrines of Reformed soteriology<sup>16</sup>.

The objector's practical concern—that this elevates union beyond Scripture—is answered by the fact that this framework originates in Reformed theology precisely because it honors the biblical emphasis on being "in Christ."

<sup>1</sup> Feynman, R. P., Leighton, R. B., & Sands, M. (1963). *The Feynman Lectures on Physics. Volume I: Mainly Mechanics, Radiation, and Heat*.

<sup>2</sup> Hecht, E. (2002). *Optics (4th ed.)*. Addison-Wesley.

<sup>3</sup> Einstein, A. (1905). *On a Heuristic Viewpoint Concerning the Production and Transformation of Light*. *Annalen der Physik*.

<sup>4</sup> Kippenhahn, R., & Weigert, A. (1990). *Stellar Structure*. Springer-Verlag.

<sup>5</sup> Halliday, D., Resnick, R., & Walker, J. (2014). *Fundamentals of Physics (10th ed.)*. Wiley.

<sup>6</sup> Hertz, H. (1887). *On the Relation Between the Electric and Magnetic Field in Electromagnetic Waves*. *Annalen der Physik*.

<sup>7</sup> Setlow, R. B., & Carrier, W. L. (1966). *Ultraviolet Inactivation of DNA in Escherichia coli: The Action Spectrum and a Comparison with Other Microorganisms*. *Journal of Bacteriology*.

<sup>8</sup> National Institutes of Health (NIH). (2022). *Ultraviolet Radiation and Skin Cancer*. National Cancer Institute.

<sup>9</sup> Joly, J., & Moser, C. (2015). *Water Chemistry and Quality Control in Environmental Monitoring*. Elsevier.

<sup>10</sup> Dufour, A., & Reichenbach, F. (2013). *Water Quality and Health*. World Health Organization.

<sup>11</sup> Kandel, E. R., Schwartz, J. H., & Jessell, T. M. (2013). *Principles of Neural Science (5th ed.)*. McGraw-Hill.

<sup>12</sup> Einstein, A. (1905). *On a Heuristic Viewpoint Concerning the Production and Transformation of Light*. *Annalen der Physik*.

<sup>13</sup> Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 488–489.

<sup>14</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Union with Christ: Gospel Ministry as Dying and Rising with Jesus*, in *Theology for Ministry: How Doctrine Affects Pastoral Life and Practice*, ed. William R. Edwards, John C. A. Ferguson, and Chad Van Dixhoorn (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2022), 172–173.

<sup>15</sup> Douglas Vickers, *Discovering the Christian Mind: Reason and Belief in Christian Confession* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Pastoral Ministry in Union with Christ*, in *The Practical Calvinist: An Introduction to the Presbyterian and Reformed Heritage*, ed. Peter A. Lillback (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), 446.

## **VI. The study text proposes simultaneity and mutual self-support, with union causing regeneration while requiring the "new creature" for its occurrence.**

Claiming regeneration is an effect of union, yet union occurs "through the new creature" produced by regeneration, creates a logical loop. How can union depend on regeneration (the divine nature) while regeneration depends on union? This mutual causation risks conceptual incoherence, akin to asking which comes first in an unbreakable circle.

Unnecessary complication: Classic Reformed theology (e.g., Westminster Confession, Berkhof's Systematic Theology) often treats regeneration as the instantaneous, monergistic act that imparts new life to the spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1–5), enabling repentance and faith. Faith then unites the believer to Christ, appropriating justification and all benefits. This maintains a clear *ordo salutis* (order of salvation): regeneration → faith/repentance (conversion) → union/justification → sanctification. The text's rejection of sequence blurs distinctions that Scripture and historic confessions preserve for clarity.

### **Response to objection:**

The logical circularity objection dissolves when you distinguish between "logical order" and "chronological order"—a distinction that classical Reformed theology has long recognized.

The confusion arises from treating these realities as occurring in chronological sequence, when actually the order is logical rather than chronological. Union with Christ logically precedes both regeneration and justification, yet chronologically the moment of union with Christ is also the moment when regeneration and justification occur<sup>1</sup>. This means regeneration doesn't cause union in time; rather, union is the foundational reality that logically grounds regeneration, even though both happen simultaneously.

Think of it this way: which spoke of a wheel starts first? Light and heat enter at the same moment. Sensation and perception aren't separated in time, although the former is the cause of the latter<sup>1</sup>. The causal relationship exists logically without requiring temporal sequence.

John Owen (1616–1683), one of the towering intellects in English Puritan theology directly addresses the apparent circularity between union with Christ and regeneration<sup>1</sup>. Owen explains that regeneration is an effect of union with Christ, not its cause in terms of time and nature, yet it's an effect that immediately and inseparably accompanies union—where one is not, neither is the other<sup>2</sup>. The Holy Spirit's act uniting believers to Christ is simultaneously the act that cleanses their nature.

Additionally, the spiritual life poured out before mystical union doesn't exist outside Christ, since the initial life-principle is the work of the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from Christ. This constitutes a passive union rather than an active one from our side, with

Christ as the meritorious cause.<sup>3</sup> The believer receives regenerative capacity from the Spirit before consciously exercising faith, yet this capacity itself flows from union already established in God's purpose.

The objection of circularity breaks when you recognize that God's causation operates differently than human causation—divine action encompasses logical priority and temporal simultaneity without contradiction.

<sup>1</sup> K. M. Kavic, Owen, John (1616–83), in *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic*, ed. Martin Davie et al. (London; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; InterVarsity Press, 2016), 642.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Vickers, *When God Converts a Sinner: Confessional Perspectives on Justification and the Christian Life* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907), 793.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Vickers, *Discovering the Christian Mind: Reason and Belief in Christian Confession* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics: Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, ed. John Bolt et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2019), 1:263.

## **VII. The study text asserts that union is only consciously realized and cultivated through faith, post-regeneration.**

However, if the sinner is regenerated (made alive) without yet exercising faith, and faith is what actively unites to Christ (Romans 5:1–2; access by faith into grace), then regeneration must precede conscious union. The "unconscious union" posited as foundational lacks biblical warrant and introduces a speculative category. Scripture ties union to faith: "By faith you are in Christ Jesus" (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:30; Galatians 3:26–27: baptized into Christ by faith).

Ephesians 2 sequence: Dead in sins → made alive (regeneration) together with Christ → raised up with him and seated with him in the heavenly places (union language). The "together with Christ" follows quickening, suggesting regeneration enables incorporation into Christ.

### **Response to objection:**

The objection conflates two distinct theological categories: the "establishment" of union and the "conscious realization" of union through faith. These operate on different planes and need not follow the same temporal sequence.

Union with Christ involves both an objective dimension—established by the Holy Spirit—and a subjective dimension realized through faith<sup>1</sup>. The objection assumes these must occur in chronological order, but they're better understood as simultaneous aspects of a single salvific event. When a sinner exercises faith, that faith doesn't "create" union; rather, faith is the conscious appropriation of a union the Spirit has already established.

Faith itself is given by the Spirit—Paul identifies it as "the spirit of faith"—meaning the human subject does not initiate faith but receives it as God's gift<sup>1</sup>. This reframes the sequence: regeneration (the Spirit's work producing the capacity for faith) and faith (the conscious response) are not competing causes but complementary aspects of a single divine action. The Spirit simultaneously regenerates the will and awakens faith within that regenerated capacity.

Critically, the reception of Christ involves both passive and active dimensions—a spiritual principle is first implanted in the human will, from which active faith then issues<sup>2</sup>. This passive reception precedes conscious faith without being "unconscious



union” in a speculative sense; rather, it’s the Spirit’s preparatory work that makes conscious faith possible. The believer doesn’t exercise faith in a spiritual vacuum but from within a regenerated condition the Spirit has already created.

Regeneration and mystical union cannot be separated—there is no regeneration without establishing union with Christ, and no union except in the regenerate<sup>3</sup>. They’re inseparable not because one causes the other chronologically, but because they describe the same event from different angles: God’s act (union established) and the human response (faith exercised). Romans 5:1–2 describes the conscious, experiential access faith provides, not the temporal beginning of union itself.

<sup>1</sup> Sung Rual Choi, *Union with Christ: Re-Reading Calvin* in Korean-American Reformed Theology (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907), 794.

<sup>3</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (New York; London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1900), 325.

## VIII. Emphasizing union as the "great fact" grounding everything, with regeneration as secondary, can lead to confusion.

If union is unconscious at the moment of regeneration and only appropriated later, believers may doubt their salvation during periods of weak faith, wondering if they are truly "in union." Classic evangelicalism grounds assurance in the objective fact of regeneration evidenced by faith and fruit (2 Peter 1:10; 1 John passages) not the awareness of it.

Positing an initial union that precedes conscious faith risks detached mysticism, where salvation feels more like an esoteric spiritual merger than the clear biblical pattern of hearing the word, being reborn by the Spirit, and believing unto union.

### Response to objection:

The objection assumes that emphasizing union as foundational necessarily diminishes regeneration’s importance—but this conflates logical priority with causal significance. Union and regeneration aren’t competing explanations; they’re complementary descriptions of the same divine action viewed from different angles.

Logically, union precedes regeneration, yet they remain inseparable<sup>1</sup>. This distinction prevents confusion: union describes the “ground” of salvation (what God establishes), while regeneration describes the “means” by which that union becomes operative in the believer’s transformed nature. Neither is secondary in importance; they’re sequential in explanation but simultaneous in occurrence.

The critical clarification is that the Holy Spirit’s special and particular work is to produce union<sup>1</sup>, and faith emerges because of this union, helping to sustain, develop, and strengthen it—a union primarily established through the Spirit’s work<sup>1</sup>. Regeneration isn’t a byproduct; it’s the immediate, inseparable consequence of union being established. Regeneration and union must never be separated—you cannot be born again without being in Christ; you are born again because you are in Christ<sup>1</sup>.

The confusion arises when theologians treat these as separate events requiring temporal ordering. Instead, the great fact of subjective Christianity is union with Christ, whereby we receive the atonement<sup>2</sup>—meaning union is the “mechanism” through which all redemptive benefits, including regeneration, become effective. The union carries spiritual union with the three Persons of the Godhead, grounded in God’s eternal predestination, and the Holy Spirit guides believers progressively into fuller realization of its meaning and benefits<sup>3</sup>.

Emphasizing union as foundational “clarifies” regeneration’s role: regeneration is how union becomes experientially real in the believer’s transformed nature. They’re not competing categories but integrated aspects of a single salvific reality.

<sup>1</sup> Jason Meyer, *Theologians on the Christian Life: Lloyd-Jones on the Christian Life: Doctrine and Life as Fuel and Fire* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2018), 83–85.

<sup>2</sup> Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907), 795.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Vickers, *Discovering the Christian Mind: Reason and Belief in Christian Confession* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2011).